GROUNDWORK

text series # 3

Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm
by David Bollier

RUM 46

Imprint: rum46

GROUNDWORK
Text series on participation, urbanity, alternative economies

This text series is published in connection to the exhibition project *Room for Improved Futures, rum46 2017 - 2018*

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Aarhus DK 2017

AARHUS KOMMUNE STATENS KUNSTFOND NORDISK KULTURFOND

Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm

by David Bollier

In facing up to the many profound crises of our time, we face a conundrum that has no easy resolution: how are we to imagine and build a radically different system while living within the constraints of an incumbent system that aggressively resists transformational change? Our challenge is not just articulating attractive alternatives, but identifying credible strategies for actualizing them.

I believe the commons – at once a paradigm, a discourse, an ethic, and a set of social practices – holds great promise in transcending this conundrum. More than a political philosophy or policy agenda, the commons is an active, living process. It 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. This process blends production (self-provisioning), governance, culture, and personal interests into one integrated system.

This essay provides a brisk overview of the commons, commoning, and their great potential in helping build a new society. I will explain the theory of change that animates many commoners, especially as they attempt to tame capitalist markets, become stewards of natural systems, and mutualize the benefits of shared resources. The following pages describe a commons-based critique of the neoliberal economy and polity; a vision of how the commons can bring about a more ecologically sustainable, humane society; the major economic and political changes that commoners seek; and the principal means for pursuing them.

Finally, I will look speculatively at some implications of a commons-centric society for the market/state alliance that now constitutes "the system." How would a world of commons provisioning and governance change the polity? How could it address the interconnected pathologies of relentless economic growth, concentrated corporate power, consumerism, unsustainable debt, and cascading ecological destruction?

Goals of the Commons Movement

Before introducing the commons more systematically, let me just state clearly what the commons movement seeks to achieve. Commoners are focused on reclaiming their "common wealth" in both the material and political sense: they want to roll back the pervasive privatization and marketization of their shared resources – from land and water to knowledge and urban spaces – and reassert greater participatory control over those resources and community life. They wish to make certain resources *inalienable* – protected from sale on the market and conserved for future generations. This project – reversing market enclosures and reinventing the commons – seeks to achieve what state regulation has generally failed to achieve: effective social control of abusive, unsustainable market behavior.

Although the terms of engagement vary, countless activist communities around the world are playing out this drama of resistance to the neoliberal economy and the creation of commons-based alternatives. The essential similarity of the resistance and commoning are not always apparent because the conflicts occur at many levels (i.e., local, region, national, and transnational); in diverse resource-domains; and with self-descriptions that may or may not use the commons language. Yet there is a shared dissent from the grand narrative of free-market ideology and its near-theological belief in "self-made" individualism, expansive private property rights, constant economic growth, government deregulation, capital-driven technological innovation, and consumerism. Commoners see this belief-system as the engine of the extractive market economy, a system that is destroying ecosystems, undermining democracy, disempowering communities, and dispossessing individuals, especially the poor and vulnerable.

But rather than focus on conventional political venues, which tend to be structurally rigged against systemic change, commoners are more focused on creating their own alternative systems outside of the market and state. It is not as if they have abandoned conventional politics and regulation as vehicles for self-defense or progressive change; it's just that they recognize the inherent limits of electoral politics and policy-driven solutions at a time when these channels are so corrupted. Even in the best circumstances, conventional policy systems tend to be legalistic, expensive, expert-driven, bureaucratically inflexible, and politically corruptible, which make them a hostile vehicle for serious change "from the bottom."

Instead, commoners have focused on carving out protected spaces for their own initiatives, engaging with policy only as politically necessary or feasible. Rather than look to state authorities as guarantors or administ-

rators of their interests, commoners generally prefer to seek direct sovereignty and control over spheres of life that matter to them: their cities, neighborhoods, food, water, land, information, infrastructure, credit and money, social services, and much else. The very process of independent commoning has numerous benefits. By demonstrating the superiority of commons-based systems (e.g., Free or Open Source software development, local food provisioning, cooperatives, alternative currencies, etc.), commoning creates quasi-independent, socially satisfying alternatives to capital-driven markets.

The more profound influence of the commons may be cultural. Commoning regenerates people's social connections with each other and with "nature." It helps build new aspirations and identities. By giving people significant new opportunities for personal agency that go well beyond the roles of consumer, citizen, and voter, the commons introduces people to new social roles that embody wholesome cultural values and entail both responsibilities and entitlement. In a time when market culture is ubiquitous and invasive, commoning cultivates new cultural spaces and nourishes inner, subjective experiences that have far more to do with the human condition and social change than the manipulative branding and disempowering spectacles of market culture. Finally, the real significance of commoning may be that it is not ultimately about a fixed philosophical vision or policy agenda, but about engaged action in building successful commons. Commoners would agree with conceptual artist Jenny Holzer: "Action creates more trouble than words."

Clarifying What the Term "Commons" Means

The idea of the commons is confusing to many contemporary observers because the term "commons" seems to have so many meanings. This stems both from an historical smear – the "tragedy of the commons" fable – as well as from legitimate usages of a term with multivalent meanings. So before we proceed, it is important to clarify the language of the commons. The words we use are not just descriptive, but evocative and performative – that is, they are markers of identity, a way to express emotions, and a tool for culturally constituting a cohort of people. To understand the subversive, strategic power of the commons, then, one must first understand the tangled modern usage of the word "commons."

For more than forty years, much of the educated public has considered the commons to be a failed management regime associated with government coercion. This idea can be traced to a famous essay written by biologist

Garrett Hardin in 1968, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” a short piece in the journal *Science*. Hardin presented a parable of a shared pasture on which no single herder has a “rational” incentive to limit his cattle’s grazing.[1] The inevitable result, said Hardin, is that each farmer will selfishly use as much of the common resource as possible, which will inevitably result in its overuse and ruin – the so-called “tragedy of the commons.” The best solution, he argued, is to allocate private property rights to the resource in question.

In truth, Hardin was not describing a commons, but an open access regime or free-for-all in which everything is free for the taking. In a commons, however, there is a distinct community that governs the resource and its usage. Commoners negotiate their own rules of access and use, assign responsibilities and entitlements, set up monitoring systems to identify and penalize free riders, among other acts to maintain the commons. Commons scholar Lewis Hyde has puckishly called Hardin’s “tragedy” thesis “The Tragedy of Unmanaged, Laissez-Faire, Commons-Pool Resources with Easy Access for Non-Communicating, Self-Interested Individuals.” [2]

Professor Elinor Ostrom, a political scientist at Indiana University, helped rescue the commons from the memory hole to which mainstream economics had consigned it. Over the course of her career, from the 1970s until her death in 2012, Ostrom documented the many ways in which hundreds of communities, mostly in rural settings in poorer nations, can in fact manage natural resources sustainably. As an empirical matter, the commons can work, and work well. The central issue that Ostrom tried to address was “how a group of principals who are in an interdependent situation can organize and govern themselves to obtain continuing joint benefits when all face temptations to free-ride, shirk or otherwise act opportunistically.[3]

Ostrom’s landmark 1990 book, *Governing the Commons*, is justly re nowned for identifying eight key “design principles” for successful commons. Her other books explored, among others things, ways to diversify and nest governance (i.e., what she labeled “polyarchy”) in order to empower bottom-up initiative and decision-making.[4] For this work, Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, the first woman to be so honored. Coming immediately on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis, the Nobel Prize committee may have wished to showcase how ongoing social *relationships* play as significant a role in economics as impersonal market *transactions*. Ostrom’s scholarship laid the groundwork for this reconceptualization of both economic analysis and the role of the commons in it – without taking the next step, political engagement.

So far I have reviewed two distinct levels of discourse about the commons – the commons as an unmanaged resource (Hardin), and the commons as a social institution (Ostrom). To this day, most mainstream politicians and economists tend to regard the commons in Hardin's sense, as an inert, unowned resource. But this framing fails to acknowledge the reality of a commons as a dynamic, evolving social activity: commoning. In practice, a commons consists not just of a resource, but of a *community* that manages a *resource* by devising its own *rules, traditions, and values*. All three are needed.

In short, the commons must be understood as a living social system of creative agents. This third level of discourse is unsettling to conventional academics because it moves the entire discussion out of the familiar economistic framework based on *Homo economicus*, and opens the door to what they regard as the vagaries of anthropology, psychology, sociology, geography, and other "soft," humanistic sciences. This makes it more difficult to build the tidy quantitative, mechanical models that economists and policymakers prize so highly. When there are so many idiosyncratic local, historical, cultural, and intersubjective factors at play, it is well-nigh impossible to propound a standard, universal typology of commons.

The commons discourse frankly seeks to rescue the messy realities of human existence and social organization from the faux regularities and worldview of standard economics, bureaucratic systems, and modernity itself. The complicated reality is that a commons arises whenever a given community decides that it wishes to manage a resource collectively, with an accent on fair access, use, and long-term sustainability. This can happen in countless unpredictable ways. I have been astonished to discover, for example, the commons that revolve around community theater, open-source microscopy, open-source mapping to aid humanitarian rescue, and hospitality for migrants. Each of these "world-making" communities are animated by their own values, traditions, history, intersubjectivity, etc. When "seen from the inside," each commons must be seen as socially unique.

Once we acknowledge that the ontological premises of a commons matter, and that those premises may vary greatly, we enter a new cosmology of social phenomena. The boundaries between commons and context become blurred (as one might expect in a socio-ecological system, for example). Social scientists face vexing methodological challenges in determining which factors define a given commons and which are incidental. I believe one can only understand commons as holistic living systems, and that

requires new heuristic methods and templates, such as Christopher Alexander's idea of pattern languages.[5]

The ontological variability of the commons is supremely maddening and incomprehensible to economists and others living within the modernist worldview, which is why most of them persist in regarding the commons simply as a resource. It's as if they cannot abide the idea that everything cannot be neatly classified into standard, universal categories, the *sine qua non* of neoliberal market culture.

But in the world of the commons, that is precisely the point – to build human spaces in which the local, the distinctive, and the historical *matter.* Unique experiences, vernacular traditions, cultural values, and geographies must be recognized and privileged. The commons, then, is a language and socio-political-economic project for honoring the *particularity* of lived experience – and more, for honoring *the generative and intrinsic human value of such particularity.* An indigenous commons will be quite different from an urban commons, and both of them will be quite different from, say, the Wikihouse design community. And yet they are all commons. The commons, in Arturo Escobar's words, point us to a "pluriverse."[6] As a new generation of evolutionary scientists is finding, this is the baseline reality of the human species: a shared DNA that manifests itself in many highly varied local adaptations. *Pace* neoliberalism, why can't our economic and political institutions reflect this fact?

One might say that the commons paradigm asks us to cross an important ontological threshold – but mainstream political and economic players in Western, industrial societies adamantly refuse to do so. We see this in the West's disdain for the idea of "nature's rights," "biocultural protocols," and self-determination for local communities (and even for nations, as trade treaties seek to suppress democratic limits on market investments). The commons names a set of social values that lie beyond market price and propertization. They honor informal, tacit, experiential, intergenerational, ecological, and even cosmic realities that cannot be comprehended by rational actor theory in economics, say, or the neo-Darwinian, survival-of-the-fittest narratives that inform neoliberal economics.

In this sense, the commons challenges the worldview of the liberal bureaucratic state and conventional science, both of which treat ecosystems and humans as more or less fungible and commodifiable resources. Our labor is treated as a "human resource" to be bought and managed; bee pollination is seen as "nature's services" that can be priced; even life forms

can be patented and owned. By insisting upon the inalienability of living systems and their intrinsic (non-tradeable, shared) value, the commons makes radical demands for system change that are not just political and economic, but cultural and ontological.

Why the Commons Discourse Matters

I have reviewed the modern history of commons discourse because it helps us understand the "theory of change" that the commons movement is seeking to enact. The language of the commons is, first, an instrument for reorienting people's perceptions and understanding. It helps name and illuminate the realities of market enclosure and the value of commoning. Without the commons language, these two social realities remain culturally invisible or at least marginalized – and therefore politically inconsequential.

Commons discourse provides a way to make moral and political claims that conventional policy discourse prefers to ignore or suppress. Using the concepts and logic of the commons helps bring into being a new cohort of commoners who can recognize their mutual affinities and shared agenda. They can more readily assert their own sovereign values and priorities in systemic terms. More than an intellectual nicety, the coherent philosophical narrative of the commons helps prevent capital from playing one interest off against another: nature vs. labor, labor vs. consumers, consumers vs. the community. Through the language and experiences of commoning, people can begin to move beyond the constrictive social roles of "employee" and "consumer," and live more integrated lives as whole human beings. Instead of succumbing to the divide-and-conquer tactics that capital deploys to neutralize demands for change, the language of the commons provides a holistic vision that helps diverse victims of market abuse recognize their shared victimization, develop a new narrative, cultivate new links of solidarity and – one can hope – build a constellation of working alternatives driven by a different logic.

The potential of the commons discourse in effecting change should not be underestimated. I see the darkly brilliant counterexample of cost-benefit analysis discourse, which American industry in the 1980s succeeded in making the default methodology for environmental, health, and safety regulation. This gambit neutered a set of social, ethical and environmental policies by grafting onto them the language of market economics and quantification. The discourse effectively eclipsed many elements of statutory law and changed the overall perception of regulation. I see the commons discourse as a similar kind of epistemological inter-

vention: a systemic way to reclaim social, ecological, and ethical values for managing our shared wealth.

Economics and the Commons

As the foregoing discussion implies, the commons movement seeks to change our very conception of "the economy." Rather than consider "the market" as an autonomous, "natural" realm of society that somehow exists apart from the Earth's natural systems and our social needs, commoners seek to integrate the social, ecological, and economic. Karl Polanyi, in his landmark book *The Great Transformation*, explained how market culture in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries gradually supplanted kinship, custom, religion, morality, and community to become the primary ordering principle of society. That transformation must be reversed; unfettered capital and markets must be re-embedded in society and made answerable to it. We must make capital investment, finance, production, corporate power, international trade, and so on, subordinate to societal needs.

Along with allied movements, the commons movement seeks to develop institutions and norms for a post-capitalist, post-growth order. This means confronting the monoculture of market-based options with a richer, more vibrant sense of human possibilities than those offered by the producer/consumer dyad. The book that I recently edited with Silke Helfrich, *Patterns of Commoning*, profiles several dozen fascinating, successful commons that draw upon different human capacities and social forms. These include community forests, local currencies, Fab Labs, municipal water committees, farmland trusts for supporting local family farming, indigenous "biocultural heritage" areas for stewarding biodiversity, permaculture farming, "omni-commons" structures that provide administrative/legal support to commons-based enterprises, and many others.

Such mutualized systems of provisioning must be developed and extended. They represent socially and ecologically benign alternatives to the debt-driven economy catering to unquenchable market demand. (A brief side-note: legal and organizational forms are no guarantee for breaking the logic of capitalism – one need only look at the decline of many co-ops into quasi-corporatism and managerialism. Still, such forms can provide the potential for moving to more benign forms of consumption, if not post-consumerist social mores.) There is hope as well in the multi-stakeholder co-operative model, which successfully provides social services to people in Quebec, Italy, and Japan. Cooperative forms also need to supplant proprietary digital platforms now dominated by

Facebook, Uber, Lyft, Airbnb, Task Rabbit, Mechanical Turk, and other "sharing economy" ventures (i.e., micro-rental and spot-labor markets) that are privatizing and monetizing the fruits of social cooperation. A major new effort to invent co-operative models for online platforms was launched at a "Platform Cooperativism" conference in New York City in November 2015.[7]

Commoners around the world are pioneering a number of important institutional innovations that seek to replace exploitative proprietary market platforms and corporate structures. These innovations include:

- *open-value networks* such as Sensorica and Enspiral, which function as collaborative digital "guilds" of entrepreneurs and socially minded commoners;
- *buying clubs and reconfigured production/supply chains for mutual benefit.* Examples include the clothing production system developed by the Solidarity Economy in Italy and the Fresno [California] Commons that is reinventing the regional food supply chain through a commons-based trust.
- *state-chartered stakeholder* trusts that mutualize the revenues generated by state-owned resources (Alaska Permanent Fund and new models proposed by Peter Barnes);
- *open source programming communities* that freely share code and sometimes are directed by affiliated foundations led by respected elders of the community; and
- *global peer production design and local manufacturing communities* that are creating modular, low-budget cars, farm equipment, furniture and other physical products.

In the future, many tech players anticipate that *distributed autonomous* organizations functioning on open networks will be possible, thanks to the "blockchain ledger," the software innovation that makes Bitcoin possible. Blockchain technology enables people to validate the authenticity of an individual digital file (a bitcoin, a document, a digital identity) without the need for a third-party guarantor such as a bank or government body. By democratizing the ability of self-organized groups to authenticate digital identity (instead of having to rely on Facebook or Twitter, for example), commoners could use blockchain technology to allocate specified rights to its members, resulting in a new kind of distributed, self-governing organization. The blockchain could provide a rudimentary (or eventually sophisticated) framework for network-based "smart contracts" that could enable versatile forms of collective governance.

It could also serve as an accounting infrastructure for value-sharing among participants in a digital commons.[8]

A significant unresolved problem for many of these commons-based institutions, however, is access to credit and revenues. Conventional banks and financial institutions, even social and ethical banks, find it difficult to make loans to commons that are not profit-seeking commercial enterprises. An open source design and manufacturing ecosystem, for example, has no intellectual property to offer as collateral to a bank, and so their "products" – fuel-efficient, open source vehicles, or cheap, locally sourceable farm equipment – cannot obtain capital to expand. Fortunately, many near-forgotten historical models of cooperative finance are being rediscovered and blended with new technologies to support commons. These include novel DIY credit systems, alternative currencies, and crowdfunding platforms like Goteo in Spain. Interest-free credit of the sort developed by JAK Bank in Sweden is being adapted to service local transition economies, while others are exploring new types of crowdequity schemes for commons.[9]

The basic point is that a post-capitalist vision for finance and money is fitfully emerging. Self-organized commons are poised to create their own value-accounting and exchange systems, including currencies and credit, which could enable them to bypass many of the pathologies of conventional debt-driven lending and market-based production.

On a parallel track, many existing financial institutions could be expanded to complement and support this rising sector. Public banks of the sort established by the State of North Dakota could provide low-cost credit to a wide variety of social and ecological needs. Community development finance institutions, and social and ethical banks such as Banca Populare Etica in Spain and Italy, can also provide needed finance to the commons economy. Much remains to be done to knit together this eclectic jumble of enterprises into a more integrated and developed infrastructure of commons-oriented finance. But as conventional bank and finance systems begin to implode under the weight of the capitalism's contradictions, and as new digital technologies and commons-based communities demonstrate new cooperative options, a new generation of mutualized finance holds great promise.[10] In a separate but related policy vein, commoners see the need to recapture public (government) control of the ability to create money from the private sector so that money can be used to serve public, democratically determined needs rather than the narrow profit-making goals of commercial lenders.[11]

It is worth emphasizing the role of a large, diversified realm of common-based production based on *indirect* reciprocity, in contrast to markets. Participation in timebanks, open source networks, co-learning communities, and artistic commons (to name only a few examples) are generally not based on one-on-one exchange, but on personal commitments to the community as a whole – a "pool and share" approach. Often patronized as the "voluntary sector" or "do-gooding," these convivial communities (in the sense described by Ivan Illich) are in fact productive workhorses. They perform many services in caring, humane, and low-cost ways, something that government programs and markets notably cannot.

The "new economy" that commoners seek to build is not so much an economy as a blended hybrid of the social, the economic, and self-governance. The resulting system, as seen in scores of examples, is more transparent and controllable by communities, and more flexible, locally responsive, and regarded as trustworthy and socially concerned. These commons are also less prone to creating the negative externalities routinely created by markets.

The big challenge for commoners is to federate their models into larger, collaborative social ecosystems. It is also important for them to enlist government as a partner so that it can provide legal frameworks for commoning, technical support, and even indirect subsidies. Since existing national governments may be reluctant to venture down this path (due to their historic alliances with corporate elites), it is quite likely that cities will become the key mover in incubating commons-based innovations – a point amply confirmed by the robust diversity of urban commoners who participated in a recent international conference, "The City as a Commons," held in Bologna, Italy.[12]

Let me interject a procedural note with strategic implications: many progressives tend to assume that state law and public policy – top-down systems – are the most effective, rapid way to achieve "system change." I disagree. These tools are often necessary, but they have a diminishing effectiveness in today's networked world. It is exceedingly difficult to achieve transformational change through conventional political institutions now paralyzed by partisan gridlock and high jurisprudential barriers.

Beyond these realities, the instrumentalities of government themselves are often ineffectual, slow, and experienced as illegitimate. In his 2014 book *The Utopia of Rules*, anthropologist/activist David Graeber catalogs the structural limitations of centralized command-and-control bureaucracies

in a networked age. The singular failure of the left has been its inability to propose functional, human-scale alternatives that can affirmatively foster citizen initiative, participation, and innovation: "strong democracy" that has everyday meaning and impact. I consider this a penetrating insight.

One path forward: The "next system" will have to embrace peer cooperation on distributed networks to do work that bureaucracy cannot perform well. This is not a matter of "reinventing government," but a matter of integrating production, governance, and bottom-up participation into new sorts of commons institutions. Economic and technological trends are clearly headed in this direction, a reality documented by Yochai Benkler in The Wealth of Networks; Jeremy Rifkin in his Zero Marginal Cost Society; and Michel Bauwens in his many writings at the P2P Foundation wiki and blog. Network-based or -assisted commons can provide a vital infrastructure for building a new social economy of participatory control and mutualized benefit. How to coordinate bureaucratic systems with network-based commons remains a difficult challenge, but many "Government 2.0" experiments are already exploring the possibilities.

The great virtue of many of the commons-based innovations described here is that they do not necessarily require government or policy to move forward – and therefore they can bypass conventional political venues. Law, policy, and procurement could certainly facilitate the growth of a Commons Sector, and some existing government policies that privilege market incumbents and criminalize commoning simply need to be eliminated. And financial support for commons remains an important, unmet challenge. Still, commons-based systems of provisioning and services have great capacities to meet needs in innovative ways, growing not through hierarchical scaling but through smaller-scale replication-and-federation.

The Ramifications for Society, the Environment and the Polity

The economic/provisioning vision sketched above obviously has far-reaching implications for inequality, ecosystems, gender and race relations, and the polity. The rest of this essay suggests how a commons-centric society would deal with these issues.

Wealth and income inequality. When people's basic needs can be met through a system that is not driven by debt and profit-seeking, but instead through commons functioning outside of markets, it is possible to reduce the grotesque inequalities of wealth and income that neoliberal capitalism produces. The point of commoning, after all, is to *de-commodify* or *mutualize* the provisioning of needs so that they can be available to all. The late

alternative monetary expert Margrit Kennedy once estimated that as much as 50% of the cost of essential goods and services sold in the market represents debt. If a family can reduce its dependence on conventional markets and credit, therefore, its cost of living can decline dramatically along with its vulnerability to predatory corporations.

The de-commodification and mutualization of daily life can occur through many commons-based systems: community land trusts that take land out of the market to reduce housing costs; cooperative finance alternatives to reduce exposure to high-interest rates and debt; cooperatively produced goods and services to reduce costs and enhance quality; shared infrastructure (energy, transportation, Internet access, social media platforms); open and commons-based systems for software code, data, information, scientific research, creative works, etc.

Social justice and racial and gender equality. The commons paradigm does not speak directly to various racial, ethnic, or gender concerns because its framework is more focused on governance, provisioning, and social cooperation. However, the commons paradigm is keenly focused on inclusiveness and social solidarity, and in this respect can go beyond the formal legal rights that liberal democracies provide (but don't necessarily fulfill). Markets do not really care about human need; what matters to them is consumer demand. Anyone without the money to express consumer demand is regarded as marginal or invisible. But commons are dedicated to meeting people's basic material needs first, and they strive to do so in socially committed and inclusive ways. Just as many African-American communities used cooperatives as a means of building dignity and respect while meeting material needs,[13] so the commons, as a social institution, have a core commitment to social need, fairness, and respect.

As for women, children, and families, historian of the commons Peter Linebaugh has noted that "birth, nurturance, neighborhood, and love are the beginnings of social life. The commons of the past has not been an exclusively male place. In fact, it is one very often where the needs of women and children come first. And not 'needs' only but decision-making and responsibility have belonged to women from the neighborhoods of industrial 'slums to the matriarchy of the Iroquois confederation to the African village."[14]

In a commons, "care work" – which geographer Neera Singh has called "affective labor" – is primary. By contrast, capitalist markets and economics routinely ignore the "care economy" – the world of household life

and social conviviality that is essential for a stable, sane, rewarding life. Market economies regards these things as essentially free resources that somehow self-replenish themselves outside of the market realm. They see them as "pre-economic" or "non-economic" resources, which therefore don't have any standing at all and therefore can be ignored or exploited at will. In this sense, the victimization of women in doing care work is remarkably akin to the victimization suffered by commoners, colonized persons, and nature. They all generate important non-market value that capitalists depend on – yet markets generally refuse to recognize this value. A 1980 report by the UN stated the situation with savage clarity: "Women represent 50 percent of the world adult population and one third of the official labor force, they perform nearly two thirds of all working hours, receive only one tenth of the world income and own less than 1 percent of world property."

German writer Ina Praetorius recently revisited the feminist theme of "care work," projecting it onto a much larger philosophical canvas in her essay, "The Care-Centered Economy: Rediscovering What Has Been Taken for Granted."[15] Praetorius suggests how the importance of "care" can be used to imagine new structural priorities for the entire economy, helping to reorient economic institutions and behaviors. The commons is an obvious vehicle for advancing these ideas because it honors non-market care as an essential category of value-creation.

Ecosystem stewardship. Whatever the shortcomings of any individual natural resource commons, its participants realize that they must work with them, not against them. Unlike markets, commoners do not treat "the environment" as an object or commodity, but as a dynamic living system that enframes their lives. They generally have far less incentive than corporations to over-exploit the natural systems upon which they depend, and much greater incentive to act as stewards of nature for collective benefit.

Small-scale natural resource commons that revolve around forests, fisheries, pastures, groundwater, and wild game are enormously important in rural regions of marginalized countries.[16] These commons also tend to be far more ecologically benign than the energy-intensive industrial agriculture that is practiced in the "developed" world. Yet even though an estimated two billion people around the world rely on commons to meet everyday needs, they are ignored by leading economics textbooks because no market activity or capital accumulation is taking place – merely production for household use.[17]

In these commons, people are not motivated by monetary rewards but by "affective labor." Here, people's sense of self and subjectivity are intert-

wined with their biophysical environment. They take pride and pleasure in becoming stewards of resources that matter to them and their community. This is why affective labor in a commons matters – it changes how we perceive ourselves, our relationships to others, and our connection to the environment. Or in Singh's words, "Affective labor transforms local subjectivities." This is the bedrock for building a new, more ecologically mindful type of economy.

The polity and governance. What type of polity could possibly host and "govern" a wide universe of commons?[18] The very question implies a radical shift in the character and role of the state. As its limited capacities to meet needs becomes more acutely evident, resulting in public distrust, the state will need to evolve and delegate powers to allow more bottom-up, commons-based initiatives to flourish. My colleague Michel Bauwens has proposed the idea of the "Partner State," which would assist in the formation and development of commons. A commons-friendly polity would develop "meta-economic networks" to bridge these fields of action so that, for example, open knowledge networks (for technology design, software, and manufacturing) could interact constructively with people dealing with agriculture and eco-sustainability. This not just a matter of states becoming enlightened about open networks. Increasingly, states will need to rely upon networked intelligence and political legitimacy. At the same time, commoners working via digital networks will demand that states respect and support their contributions.

The idea of self-organized governance at large scales is not conjectural. It is already happening on open network platforms. We have seen many instances of bottom-up, self-organized governance to manage significant complexity in real time. Some are fairly transient such as the Arab Spring protests of 2011 and the Occupy and M15 movement demonstrations. Others are more enduring, such as the governance schemes for open source software communities, Wikipedia (80,000+ editors), and the Landless Workers movement that has organized peasant farmers internationally. New sorts of "micro-behaviors" often give rise to needed "macro-institutions," propelling the development of new species of governance.

These developments parallel some profound discoveries in the evolutionary sciences and the rise of complexity science over the past generation. Both validate the reality of bottom-up forms of social organization and governance. Extensive empirical research confirms that some of the most stable, resilient forms of governance are distributed, self-organized, and collaborative. This topic is explored at greater length in my book with

Burns H. Weston, *Green Governance* (pp. 112-130), but the basic point to emphasize is that human communities can evolve higher, more complex forms of organization without the directive control of a central sovereign or bureaucracy: "emergence" as a bottom-up theory of governance. Emergence is based on the idea that if a sufficiently defined and hospitable set of parameters and conditions is provided, stable forms of self-organization based on local circumstances can arise. This is what biological and chemical systems demonstrate all the time; autocatalytic features generate "order for free." This insight from complexity sciences matches Professor Elinor Ostrom's findings about countless self-organized commons. Effective governance need not be imposed through a comprehensive grid of uniform general rules embodied in formal state law and administered through legislators, regulators, and courts. With the right "fitness conditions," governance can emerge naturally, on its own, with the active participation and consent of the governed at the relevant scale. But subsidiarity and scale-linking systems matter.

Of course, there are differences between a network-based governance regime and a polity. But the very idea of a polity may need to evolve if we are to get beyond the current dysfunctionalities of nation-state governance. Tech platforms of commoners could play an important role in complementing or partially substituting for state authority, much as corporations have been chartered by the state, ostensibly to serve the public good. New governance forms will have to emerge as commons become more prevalent and mature, requiring new types of state support and coordination. Inevitably, the new polity that is constructed will not be comprehensible by the terms of the old order that we currently live within.

Conclusion

Because the commons movement is a pulsating, living network of commoners around the world, it is difficult to set forth a clear blueprint or predict the future. The future paradigm can only arise through an evolutionary co-creation. Still, we can already see the expansive, self-replicating power of the commons idea as it is embraced by highly diverse groups: Francophone commoners in eight countries who hosted a two-week commons festival in October 2015 with more than 300 events; urban activists who are reconceptualizing the "city as a commons"; Croatians fighting enclosures of their public spaces and coastal lands; Greeks developing a "Mediterranean imaginary" of the commons to fight neoliberal economic policies; indigenous peoples defending their ethnobotanical and biocultural traditions; digital activists mobilizing to devise new forms of "platform cooperativism"; and so on. The commons language

and framework helps develop unexpected new synergies and forms of solidarity.

As a meta-discourse that has core principles but porous boundaries, the commons has the capacity to speak at once to the worlds of politics, governance, economics, and culture. Importantly, it can also speak to the alienation associated with modernity and people's instinctive needs for human connection and meaning, something that neither the state nor the market, as they are now constituted, can do. The commons paradigm offers a deep philosophical critique of neoliberal economics, with hundreds of functioning examples that are increasingly converging. But as an action-oriented approach to system change, everything will depend upon the ongoing energy and imagination of commoners and would-be commoners to develop this globally networked living system.

The anonymous Invisible Committee in France has observed that "an insurrection is not like a plague or forest fire – a linear process which spreads from place to place after an initial spark. It takes the shape of music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythms of their own vibrations." That describes the unfolding odyssey of the commons movement, whose rhythms are producing a lot of resonance.

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Thanks to Next System Project (US), which originally published this essay.

NOTES

1 Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons.” Science 162, no. 3859 (December 1968): 1243.

2 Lewis Hyde, Common as Air: Revolution, Art and Ownership (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 44.

3 Elinor Ostrom, Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 42.

4 Elinor Ostrom, Understanding Institutional Diversity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Joanna Burber, Elinor Ostrom et al., Protecting the Commons: A Framework for Resource Management in the Americas (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001).

5 See David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, Patterns of Commoning (Commons Strategies Group, 2015).

6 Arturo Escobar, “Commons in the Pluriverse,” in Bollier and Helfrich, Patterns of Commoning, pp. 348-360.

7 Platform Cooperativism conference website, http://platformcoop.net

8 For more on Bitcoin, see http://p2pfoundation.net/Bitcoin; http://bollier.org/blog/block-chain-promising-new-infrastructure-online-commons; and http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/business/dealbook/data-security-is-becoming-the-sparkle-in-bitcoin.html?_r=1

9 See David Bollier and Pat Conaty, “Capital for the Commons: Strategies for Transforming Neoliberal Finance Through Commons-based Alternatives,” Commons Strategies Group/Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015).

10 Ibid.

11 Debt or Democracy (2015), The Future of Money (2010) and The Politics of Money (2002, co-authored with Frances Hutchinson and Wendy Olsen).

12 http://www.bollier.org/blog/city-commons-conference

13 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice (Pennsylvania State University, 2014).

14 Peter Linebaugh, “Stop, Thief!” Onthecommons.org, April 14, 2014. http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/stop-thief.

15 https://www.boell.de/en/2015/04/07/care-centered-economy

16 See, e.g., the holdings of the Digital Library of the Commons at http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc.

17 Paul A. Samuelson and William D. Nordhaus, Economics, 17th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001); Joseph E. Stiglitz and Carl. E. Walsh, Economics, 3d edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002); “Securing the Commons: Securing Property, Securing Livelihoods,” International Land Alliance website, http://www.landcoalition.org/global-initiatives/securing-commons.

18 http://bollier.org/blog/michel-bauwens-heres-what-commons-based-economy-looks.

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David Bollier is an author, activist, blogger and consultant who spends a lot of time exploring the commons as a new paradigm of economics, politics and culture. In 2010, he co-founded the Commons Strategies Group, a consulting project that works to promote the commons internationally. Currently Bollier is the Director of the Reinventing the Commons Program at the Schumacher Center for a New Economics, based in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He blogs at Bollier.org.