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The commons against neoliberalism, the commons of neoliberalism, the commons beyond neoliberalism

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I am typing these words in the Learning Commons of a local university library, a space defined less by a scholarly atmosphere of contemplation and debate and more by the gently arcing rows of brushed steel computer workstations and the proliferation of corporate brand icons. There, emblazoned on the wall, is the name of a local property developer, renowned for pushing a gentrification agenda, who donated the money to create the Learning Commons. Glowing Apple insignias beam out from students’ laptops. Flatscreen TVs announce various policies regarding food and drink on two-thirds of the screen; the last third is reserved for advertisements for debt relief and spa treatments. These help pay for the screens themselves. Long-discarded fast food wrappers clutter wood-laminate tables (cutbacks have led to a scarcity of custodial staff). On the floor lie an array of brand-name designer backpacks and handbags. While this space was allegedly designed to foster the realization of the latest buzzword-driven trends (from collaboration to synergy to cross-pollination to leadership) most of its denizens sit alone and stare transfixed at their respective screens: writing papers or preparing presentations for tomorrow’s class, chatting with friends a world away or mere feet away, watching YouTube clips of cute animals, or playing elaborate multiplayer strategy games.

If this is our ‘commons’ of learning I can safely say I want no part of it. But my complaint has little to do with the press-ganging of a once-radical term into service to the neoliberal university. In an age where the word ‘revolution’ has been used to sell everything from heating and air-conditioning systems to anti-dandruff shampoo, we can hardly take umbrage at the subjugation to neoliberal commercialism. The experience of the ‘learning commons’ reveals something more profound: the purported acrimonious opposition between the idea of the commons and the phenomenon of neoliberalism, while sometimes rhetorically and politically expedient, is inaccurate and misleading.

This brief chapter narrates how the notion of the commons, evolved within and against neoliberalism in two streams, one explicitly anti-capitalist, the other more reformist in orientation. I seek to show that while the idea and ideal of the commons still promise an antidote, or at least an alternative, to the power and ideology of neoliberal capitalism, the commons has in many ways itself been co-opted and made to serve the reproduction of neoliberalism(s) both rhetorically and
materially. In this sense it has been partially enclosed. As such, we are at a moment in which we must transcend innocent enthusiasm for the commons, and instead begin to make key critical, analytic and strategic distinctions.

**The commons and neoliberalism**

The rise of the idea of the commons in the contemporary moment cannot be separated from the simultaneous rise of neoliberalism as a material process, an ideological orientation and a political-economic period. Whereas neoliberalism implies the relentless capitalist instrumentalization of all aspects of life (de Angelis 2007), the idea of the commons suggests a form of elective cooperation and collectivism, one distinct from and superior to the allegedly disastrous forms of state-led cooperation and collectivism attempted under the heading of state-led communism. If neoliberalism boils social reality down to the bitter marrow of individualist self-seeking and competition (Harvey 2005), the idea of the commons offers us a way to speak of the wealth of community, of mutual aid, and of sharing (see Bollier and Helfrich 2012, 2015). If neoliberals insist that the market is the most efficient and just means to govern social resources (Brown 2015), the idea of the commons promises that we can devise more humane, democratic and egalitarian structures from the grassroots up (see P2P Foundation 2015). If neoliberalism signals the transformation of all the world – everything from sex to sand dunes, from dances to data – into commodities whose value is to be determined by the laws of supply and demand (McMurtry 2012), the idea of the commons offers us visions and practices to reclaim and revalue social wealth and build human relationships outside the market logic (Linebaugh 2014).

In this sense, the commons has become something of a floating signifier, a shared flag of convenience for scholars and activists the world over who would challenge neoliberalism with a radical imagination that sees beyond the horizon of the state. If, as the Zapatistas put it (see Khasnabish 2008), there is a global movement of ‘one no, many yeses’, then perhaps when those many ‘yeses’ sound at once we will hear the word ‘commons’.

Such a flexible term has its uses. It implies and sometimes helps cohere a transnational alliance of actors and what might be termed, borrowing from Benedict Anderson (2006), a radical anti-neoliberal imagined community. For example, at international gatherings like the People’s Social Forum, the commons, in a vague, idealized sense, can be cited as the unobjectionable common platform for a wide diversity of initiatives and tendencies. But the mutability of the term also has its risks. Not least of these is the ease with which neoliberal institutions co-opt it, as in the above example of the corporatized ‘learning commons’, or as in the case of the ‘creative commons’, which, although initially a platform to encourage collaboration and creativity outside the strictures of capitalist intellectual property regimes, has of late been harnessed as a means to reconfigure corporate strategy and marshal the free or devalued labour of digital and cultural workers (see Murray et al. 2014).

Further, as George Caffentzis (2012) notes, we have seen the idea of the commons seized upon with great enthusiasm by a recent crop of international development gurus and NGO-sector leaders, who see in it a potential to foster, encourage and ‘empower’ communities to become ‘self-sufficient’ and ‘self-reliant’ and thereby reduce their ‘dependency’ on what remains of the eviscerated welfare state. Certainly the Left has enthusiastically greeted the experiments with urban farming in poor, racialized neighbourhoods of Detroit (Boggs 2009; Weissman 2013), or the grassroots development of schools, community centres and clinics in austerity-ravaged Greece or Spain (see Azzellini and Sitrin 2014). But so too has the Right pointed to these as evidence of human adaptability to ‘market failures’ and ‘disruptive innovation’ in the absence of what is perceived to be the claustrophobic swaddling of the nanny state (Holcombe 2005).
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incredible success of Anthony Williams and Don Tapscott’s (2008) book *Wikinomics*, which advises that capitalist enterprises recalibrate based on the power of mass collaboration (modelled on the success of the Creative Commons licence), demonstrates the enthusiasm with which certain notions of the commons are received today.

This is all to say that while we might be tempted to envision the idea(l) of the commons as the horizon that transcends neoliberalism, we need to historicize it as evolving within neoliberalism. This does not exhaust the potential of the commons, but it does open new pathways for our analysis of the neoliberal system and for our struggles within, against and beyond it.

To understand how we arrived at this point, it is worth examining two recent anglophone articulations of the commons, and the different places they potentially lead us. Though both emerged in response to the ravages of neoliberalism, they each have very different motivations and implications.

**Global commons?**

Before tracing these two streams and their tributaries, it is worth sounding the historical aquifer that feeds them both. The original commons were those lands in medieval England and elsewhere in Europe that were legally reserved for peasants to use and tend in common (Neeson 1993; van Zanden 1999). These lands became the backbone of peasant life, a shared space to grow vegetables, graze animals and hold festivals, markets and meetings. The commons were spaces where peasants developed value practices (de Angelis 2007) for the reproduction of society and social life outside the market and the direct authority of social elites. The commons were tied to the hard-won laws and customs of land tenure that forbade feudal lords from simply evicting peasants or dictating the uses of the land (Perelman 2000).

For Marx and subsequent historians, the birth of capitalism was enabled by the dispossession of the commoners of their lands and livelihoods through ‘primitive accumulation’: a legal, military and social campaign by the ruling class that stripped peasants of their common rights and transformed formerly common land into the private property of landlords (Marx 1992; Perelman 2000; Thompson 1968). The procedures of enclosing, privatizing, marketizing and securitizing common lands preceded the emergence of capitalism (see Goldstein 2013) and, as we shall see, continued throughout capitalism’s history in various forms. Marx saw this process of primitive accumulation as essential to kick-start the further accumulation of capital, the development of a fully capitalist economy, and the legal and institutional structures germane to the bourgeois state. It also dispossessed peasants of their autonomous means of social reproduction, rendering them dependent on waged labour, a process which, over the span of centuries, drove millions into cities to become the proletariat. Furthermore, it created a flood of surplus humanity to be exported to colonies to further dispossess indigenous peoples there of their lands and livelihoods.

There is debate concerning the extent to which we might describe the processes of colonization – especially in colonial-settler states – as a process of enclosure of the commons (see Maddison 2010). Certainly we can make strong analogies between the commons-oriented cultures of European peasants and similar features in many indigenous civilizations in the Americas, Oceania and Africa. And certainly the process of colonialism depended on the transformation of common lands and resources into private property. However, we should be wary of too simple a correlation (see Greer 2012). For one, to marshal all indigenous civilizations under the banner of the commons is to reduce a wide diversity of social formations under a Eurocentric term, one that is, ultimately, Eurocentric. Second, such a position would reinforce a romantic idealism towards both the notion of the commons and indigenous civilizations. In the case of the former, such idealism slides all too easily into platitudes about the
inherent benevolence of human nature, suggesting that the commons is somehow our genetic
destiny, given that it is evidenced in such a wide range of human civilizations. In the case of the
latter, by transplanting our idealized yet Eurocentric notion of the commons onto indigenous
civilizations, we risk participating in the rehearsal of myths of the ‘noble savage’ living in a more
‘natural’ commons-based state in ‘simple’ societies. Beyond its blatant racism, this approach would
also obscure the fact that commons, even when centred around ecological wealth, are always
actively and intentionally communally governed through complex (usually egalitarian) social
mechanisms (see Ostrom 1990).

The application of the idea of the commons and of enclosure to the non-European context
elides an important historical point: dispossessed European commoners often became colonial
actors, agents and beneficiaries (Greer 2012). For instance, those ‘common lands’ on the outskirts
of New England settlements that once provided colonists with game, firewood, room to expand
and other necessities were land seized from indigenous people. The use of pasture animals on
these lands helped disrupt and deplete the ecosystems on which indigenous people depended.
Land grants promised to dispossessed European commoners in return for years of indentured
service or simply fealty were, likewise, stolen.

In some senses, the ‘commons’ as we have come to use the term today is a placeholder or a
promissory note for all those rich, nuanced, complex and sophisticated forms of relationality and
value practice that have been obliterated within capitalist societies where a huge proportion of
social relations have been subjugated to the market. In this sense, the term the ‘commons’ names
a haunting cultural absence. In indigenous and other societies that have maintained non-
capitalist forms of relationality and value practice, that thing we name the ‘commons’ often goes
by other, older names. Thus universalizing the term not only risks a Eurocentric flattening of
cultural and political diversity, it also risks desensitizing those of us who do emerge from a
neoliberal culture to how much we have to learn from cultures that have withstood capitalism
and colonialism, both in their historic formations and in their contemporary manifestation in
the neoliberalism era. For instance, in the territories where I live, Mi’Kmaq people use the term
Netukulimk to speak to the active, cyclical reciprocity between humans, community and the
earth (see Stiegman and Pictou 2010). It has no sufficient English translation, and while we might
be tempted to translate it as ‘commons’ this would actually reduce the precision, complexity and
potential of the term.

More radical commons

In any case, it was the European historical record of the commons and their enclosure that
became a resource for contemporary scholars to draw on as a means to explain today’s struggles
against the forces we would come to know as neoliberalism. In the post-war period, historians
like Christopher Hill (1972), E. P. Thompson (1968) and others associated with the production
of ‘history from below’ began to research and publish fairly popular books on the history of the
commons and of enclosure, as a means to narrate the origins of class relations in the UK (see
Linebaugh 2011). The effort here was to develop a framework for understanding the changing
dynamics of class conflict in ways that highlighted the continuities of working-class resistance
and refusal, as well as in ways that opened up possibilities for imagining social change and socialist
revolution beyond the model provided by the Soviet Union.

Later commons thinkers took inspiration from the Italian Autonomia movement, from the
Marxist-feminist movement, from radical post-Trotskyist workerists like the Johnson Forest
Tendency (including the work of theorists like C.L.R. James and Runya Dunayevskya) and,
later, from the Zapatista uprising (Midnight Notes 2001). This approach framed the commons
as a potent metaphor for describing those shared elements of life in today’s societies. From this perspective, articulated by thinkers including George Caffentzis, Silvia Federici, Peter Linebaugh, Massimo de Angelis, Harry Cleaver and others associated with the publication of the periodicals *Midnight Notes* and *Zero Work*, rivers, communities, online networks and even natural resources might be understood as commons. Conversely, the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ was seen not as merely something occurring at the origins or periphery of capitalism, but as its fundamental *modus operandi* (*Midnight Notes* 1990). Moving away from an interpretation of industrial labour as the source of all value, these thinkers took a firm interest in the *reproduction* of capital, drawing on Marxist-feminist thinkers who stressed an understanding of capitalism as dependent on ‘women’s work’ in the home (Weeks 2011). Capitalism was reframed as a system that was fundamentally based on the production of disciplinary techniques throughout the field of social life (Federici 2005, 2013; Fortunati 1995; Mies 1986). From this perspective, communities create common value (in the form of socialized wealth) and cooperative energies upon which capitalism vampirically preys, enclosing the commons again and again.

But these thinkers were also critical of the standard set of socialist prescriptions for this crisis, from Leninist vanguard parties to social democratic strategies. Rather, they envisioned the possibility of a society built upon the values of the commons from the grassroots up, seeded in community self-sufficiency and the refusal of capitalist discipline. Hence the idea and ideal of the commons in this valence offered a potent antidote to neoliberalism: the commons promises a form of decentralized political and economic collectivity beyond the welfare state based on – and generative of – autonomy and solidarity. Conversely, historical philosophers like Silvia Federici (2005 and 2013) have located the birth of modern systemic patriarchy in the enclosure of the commons, noting the way the enclosures both relied on and drove the subjugation of women’s community-based power, notably through the witch trials of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Hence, for Federici and others, the reclamation and rebuilding of the commons today is both a feminist and an anti-capitalist project, one that is immanent and iterative: we build new common structures, platforms and communities today that in some way prefigure or foreshadow the post-capitalist, post-patriarchal world we aim to create.

This approach is fundamentally based on the question of how the commons, as living actualities as well as a political horizons, might empower and enable the proletarianized classes (a category considerably broader than merely the industrial working class) to escape the capture and enclosure of capital (Caffentzis 2012). From this approach the value of the commons lies not only in its abstract potential to pose alternatives to capitalism but also in its efficacy as a platform and tool of class struggle. Hence these critics are supportive of, but sceptical towards, many of the initiatives and organizations that today claim the language of the commons, from community gardens or social centres to digital tools and platforms to the earth’s climate itself. For Caffentzis and company, these should not be seen as good in and of themselves but, rather, assessed on the basis of how they enable anti-capitalist resistance towards a revolutionary horizon.

**More liberal commons**

This orientation, then, should stand in contrast to more reformist but vitally important efforts to recuperate and recover the idea of the commons, a frame of thinking indebted primarily to the work of heterodox economist Elinor Ostrom. Her approach to the commons was intended to help recuperate the term from the infamy associated with it since Garrett Hardin’s 1968 article ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, the title of which has become an article of faith for neoliberal thinkers, implying that any form of common resource ownership or management leads inevitably to resource exhaustion, poverty, waste and despair. Hardin makes little reference to actually existing
commons past or present, but instead makes a Malthusian argument for humanity’s allegedly inherent propensity to allow individual self-seeking activity to undermine the wealth of the whole (Angus 2008). While Hardin’s argument was largely a conservative legitimation of state planning, it became a key reference point for neoliberal economists eager to champion the inherent benevolence and natural supremacy of the invisible hand of the market.

Ostrom’s work, then, emerged as a romantic counterpoint to this neoliberal adoption of the generic narrative of the tragic commons, pointing out, instead, the creative, considered and often highly democratic ways in which communities stewarded shared resources like water systems and forests. For Ostrom (1990), the commons was to be taken as an alternative or third term beside the all too common binary relationship of ‘public’ and ‘private’. The commons here was to be seen as another means of managing scarce resources that obeyed neither the top-down bureaucratic logic of the state nor the individual competitive logic of the market. But for Ostrom and her later followers, the commons was never imagined in a revolutionary frame. Rather, this work stressed the need to recognize and honour the commons as an antidote to the failures or oversights of states and markets – at worst a supplement, at best an equal partner with the state and market in the reproduction of modern economic life (see Caffentzis 2012; Ostrom et al. 2012).

This approach has both neoliberal and anti-neoliberal tendencies. On the one hand, the commons could legitimately be pointed to by neoliberal advocates of the retreat of the welfare state as a non-governmental means of supplying necessities in areas of market failure. Hence the recent neoliberal enthusiasm for ideas of ‘community’ and even for the organization form of the cooperative, as might be demonstrated by the Cameron government’s enthusiasm for so-called ‘big society’ in the UK (see Dowling and Harvie 2014): a system of incentives that aim to offload welfare state responsibilities onto private, community-based and not-for-profit groups as a means to slash government expenditures.

For anti-neoliberals working in Ostrom’s tradition, the commons provides a means to rebuild community and a sense of collective wealth in the wake of their neoliberal destruction (see Bollier and Helfrich 2012, 2015). Here, the commons is imagined predominantly as a small-but-beautiful means for citizens and communities to reclaim power and self-sufficiency within and against the general neoliberal current and, as such, might serve as a platform for a more robust systemic challenge to that paradigm. From free and open software initiatives (see Benkler 2007) to community-managed watersheds to worker-reclaimed enterprises, the commons in this valence is imagined as a form of survival and human dignity fundamentally counterpoised to the free-market fundamentalism associated with the neoliberal model, as well as to the (sometimes lethal) paternalism of the welfare state.

There is no clean line between the perspectives outlined here. They share an optimism and enthusiasm for the commons as an antidote to neoliberalism’s order of new enclosures and a faith that these must be the pivot of broader social transformation. Yet the distinction between the two, such as it can be made, provokes a series of critical questions which are difficult for any advocate of the commons to answer (some of which are well posed by Srnicek and Williams 2015): could the proliferation of actualized commons (from reclaimed factories to urban gardens to social centres to housing or care collectives to new models of information sharing) in aggregate be sufficient to overcome capitalism in its current neoliberal manifestation? If so, what overarching forms and structures of collaboration, conspiracy and cooperation would be necessary to achieve such power? Is some form of centralized planning or governance necessary either in the present moment of commons-based struggle or in the presumed commons future? What should the role of markets and money be: are they inherently antithetical to a commons-based approach? And if they are to be abolished, how (in the absence of central state planning) can the commons organize...
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a technologically complex society dependent on a highly specialized and global distribution of labour (it's hard to imagine that the same ethos that guides the conduct of a housing cooperative could ‘scale up’ to oversee the fair and equitable production of a smartphone or MRI machine). How might we even conceive of running the global energy industry as a commons? Should we seize, reorient or replace the global capitalist logistics empire? If so, how (see Bernes 2013)? Or does a movement towards the commons based on ecological principles necessarily demand a winding down (or redefinition) of the scale of human technological and industrial capacity? To what extent, and under what circumstances, do the commons in the present moment actually lead to a broader systemic transformation and to what extent does it simply alleviate the strain or pressure of the system's inherent contradictions and anxieties? To what extent might the enthusiasm for the commons as inherently equitable, egalitarian, open and participatory occlude the perpetuation of racism, sexism, ablism, colonialism and other systems of oppression and exploitation? Ought public, state-run services (e.g. healthcare, housing, schooling) remain as such or be transformed into commons, and would the demand for the latter inadvertently contribute to neoliberal calls for privatization and the downloading of social risk and care onto society at large?

Enclosure 3.0

While I have attempted to parse out several valences of theorization of the commons, the reality is that the term circulates in our neoliberal moment with an increasing currency and vagueness that all too often trade such important political distinctions for a warm, ecumenical euphemism. Hence the ‘learning commons’ where we began this chapter, or the vague use of the commons as the taken-for-granted horizon in many recent philosophical or political critiques of the new regimes of austerity.

Yet we should be careful not to allow our ire to be drawn towards yet another example of what we might term the ‘enclosure’ of language, wherein a common term of liberation and possibility is privatized and made to render up new forms of (symbolic) capital. Rather, or in addition, we should focus our attention on the structural uses and abuses of the idea and ideal of the commons under neoliberal capitalism. That is, we should insist that the diametric opposition between the commons and neoliberalism is not quite as politically or analytically reliable as we might hope.

We have, for instance, already spoken of the UK Conservative government’s ‘big society’ platform which, while it does not explicitly marshal the idea of the commons (somewhat surprising, given the nationalistic, if hypocritical, claim the British government could make to the term’s origins), does rest on the idea that volunteerism is the proper vehicle to provide forms of social care which cannot be made profitable by the market. We can also note the way various ideas of the commons have been taken up in the world of international development as the appetite for large-scale economic stimulus and modernization programmes gives way to an enthusiasm for community-level strategies of quotidian capitalism like microfinance lending (Bateman 2010; Federici 2012; Moragan and Olson 2011). The idea here is that ‘commons’ are a natural and benevolent feature of most human societies, but that they sorely lack capitalization and the capacity to ‘scale up’ and join the global competitive marketplace. Hence the supposition that loans, incentives and ‘capacity building’ at the level of individuals and communities will somehow leverage community capacities into an entrepreneurial spirit, which will reduce dependency and lead to economic growth (Roy 2012).

Essentially, as global neoliberal capitalism fails to provide the necessities of life or sustainable happiness to an ever-greater proportion of the world’s population, and as the capacities of what remains of the welfare state are further depleted, the commons are cited as the means to provide
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the basis of life support for abject or surplus populations. Worse still, the commons here become laboratories for future sites of capitalist enclosure or profit generation.

The most telling example is perhaps the birth of the so-called ‘sharing economy,’ which has risen to prominence in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis thanks in part to the widespread use of smartphone and portable electronic technology. From car-share platforms (Uber, Lyft) to applications that allow individuals to rent out rooms in their house to travellers (Airbnb) to tapping the knowledge of hard-to-reach experts and autodidacts (Quora) to micro-task employers (TaskRabbit, Amazon Mechanical Turk) to applications that allow one to share tools, leftovers and skills, this has been heralded by leading business newspapers and liberal periodicals as the wave of the future. In an era of unrelenting artificial scarcity, new technology can enable us to access the common wealth all around us, to reconnect to community and to generate an income without dependency on either the state or a formal employer. The underlying assumption is one broadly in keeping with a neoliberal narrative of competitive human behaviour and the supremacy of economic rationality. Sharing here is monetized and overseen by the simulacrum of community in the form of user-generated rankings and feedback mechanisms. Such platforms are lauded for their capacity to marketize and therefore recognize, value and render efficient ‘resources’ that might once have been left idle: a spare room, an unused drill, a parked car or a knowledgeable recluse (Scholz 2014a, 2014b; Morozov 2013). Such initiatives are fundamentally predicated on (and help reproduce) a distorted notion of ‘sharing’ that can only be germinated and sustained within a relentlessly individualistic and competitive society, wherein the collective wealth and productive capacity of humanity are fathomed as private property to be rented out for profit. Worse still, under the euphemistic banner of the ‘sharing economy’, labour is reorganized towards a hyper-neoliberal model where each individual is a competitive entrepreneur, responsible for selling their human capital to the highest bidder through proprietary systems, compounding tendencies towards economic and social precarity (Asher-Shapiro 2014).

This is an example of what we might call enclosure 3.0.

Internet gurus speak retrospectively of Web 1.0 as the first generation of internet interfaces: the basic webpages and other online utilities that users navigated towards, as if sailing between different distinct islands in an archipelago. Web 2.0 refers to the rise of social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter), user-generated content (blogs, user reviews), and personalized web experiences, wherein users essentially create their own private islands and set the parameters through which various services and information arrive at the docks. Web 3.0 is speculated to be an (imminent or already-underway) evolution of the previous form, but one empowered and energized by the incredible (and incredibly disturbing) new capacities of algorithmic computing to cultivate user data (based on everything from health records to consumer behaviour to browser histories to past social media activity) and deliver highly customized, highly specific products and information directly to the user based on some alchemy of these occult criteria. Here, we private islanders need only make the most minute of gestures (or no gestures at all) and have the content we desire (but may not have known that we desired) airdropped to our reclining beach chair.

We might understand enclosure 1.0 as the original spatial process, which began in the medieval period and accelerated through the early modern, whereby capitalism, through legal adjustments and brute force evicted commoners from their lands and seized their resources, laying waste to community and self-sufficiency. In essence, as de Angelis (2007) and John McMurtry (1999, 2002) note, this was a process of violence and theft that created the preconditions for critical spheres of social and economic life to be brought under the discipline of capital and made to obey its overarching logic of value: the accumulation of capital for its own sake. This process of enclosure continues today as global extractive capitalism displaces millions of peasants and indigenous people around the world. It might even be said to be occurring in already capitalist urban
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spaces as the processes of urban displacement (such as gentrification) destroy communities of mutual aid and solidarity in the name of speculative real estate gains. All of these rely on the expansion of surveillance, securitization and militarization. In essence, enclosure 1.0 demonstrates and sets the groundwork for other forms of enclosure: (a) the severing of people from autonomous means of social reproduction, thus rendering them dependent on a capital (b) the replacement of autonomous value practices with capitalist models including the commodification of land, labour, social care and community.

Thus enclosure 2.0 might be said to refer to the broader paradigm of ‘enclosure’ and the myriad ways in which capitalism has created and continues to create value by seizing on elements of common, cooperative labour and life. For instance: the intellectual property regimes that foreclose the distribution of knowledge, from life-saving pharmaceuticals to academic writing; the privatization of those elements of the welfare state (schools, hospitals, utilities, etc.) that were the residual products of common struggles (Haiven 2014); the destruction of ecosystems in the name of capitalist profit which has the effect of robbing communities of their means of subsistence; and the privatization of social life as public space is securitized and as culture writ large is commodified. To return to the language of value, here capital seeks to expand in a moment of neoliberal crisis (notably the crisis of what Cleaver 2005 calls the ‘Keynesian Planner State’) by claiming spheres of life once held, for various reasons, outside the market. Under the ideological, political and economic processes of neoliberalism, various aspects of social life come to be directly disciplined or organized by the market, a process Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) call the ‘real subsumption’ of labour to capital and which their Autonomist predecessors described as the rise of the ‘social factory’ where the logic of capital spread throughout all manner of social institutions (Thorburn 2003).

Enclosure 3.0, like web 3.0, is not a clean break from the past, but an evolution, complexification and intensification of what came before, one that makes full use of the revolutionary technological capacities of computerized, globalized neoliberal capitalism. The sharing economy, as well as the adoption of the ‘commons’ as a key term of neoliberal economic development and governmental programmes (micro-finance, ‘big society’) represents the leveraging of torqued technology and institutions to pry open the field of daily life and the final frontiers of non-capitalist cooperation and collaboration and transform these into either (a) means to generate profit or (b) means to maintain bare human life amid relentless market failure. Enclosure 3.0 in this sense signifies capital’s seemingly accidental but actually highly convenient ‘discovery’ of the wealth of social life and its mobilization of the idea and the actuality of the commons as the means of its own survival and reproduction.

As with previous forms of enclosure, we should not see this as simply a top-down, one-way un-nuanced process. Enclosure is driven, in part, by the tragically extorted ingenuity and ambition of dispossessed commoners searching for means to survive and thrive in the absence of forms of collective care and support. Enclosure 3.0 encourages each of us to become an entrepreneur, eagerly searching out ways to monetize those not-yet monetized aspects of our lives. Essentially, capitalism is developing the structural capacity for distributed forms of micro-enclosure. This process occurs in many stages. For instance, the birth of the monetized and commercialized Airbnb platform, which allows individuals to rent out rooms in their private homes on a short-term basis, took inspiration and ‘improved’ upon more grassroots ‘couch-surfing’ platforms that were based upon peer-to-peer, free mutual aid (Bialski 2012; Rifkin 2014). In many jurisdictions barter networks or community gardens initially designed to offer free or commons-based platforms for collaboration have been commercialized, or used as selling points to attract new (upwardly mobile) residents to once abandoned neighbourhoods (Markham 2014; see also Harvey 2012). In the bankrupt city of Detroit, for instance, community groups
are amid a battle to maintain the urban agricultural commons they have built from corporate enclosure by land speculators and would-be ‘philanthrocapitalists’ (Liu 2012; Learning from Detroit 2013). We have seen the ways in which the free and open software movement has been oddly embraced and in some cases co-opted by corporate interests keen to harness the voluntary labour of thousands of collaborative coders, designers and others (see Kleiner 2010).

In sum, Enclosure 3.0 represents not merely the theft and subsumption of the material world but also the imagination itself (Haiven 2014). Here the imagination means both the inner world of the individual as well as the shared landscape of possibility and potential shared in common among people in their interwoven and interlocking social spheres. According to Franco Berardi (2012), the capitalist cooptation of the imagination oversees the proliferation of loneliness and anxiety, depression and a sense of endless futility. To the extent that capitalism today has developed the means to tap, shape and harness our capacities for sociality, empathy, creativity, connectivity, communication, community and generosity, it does so within a context of, and in order to reproduce, a regime of commercialization, competition, spectacle and existential and economic precariousness. We must resist the urge to privatize and enclose these affective responses as personal woes, and instead recognize them as structural elements of hyper-neoliberal capitalism and integrate their effects and potentials into our strategies for confronting and overcoming it (see Plan C 2014).

Commons as actuality, spirit and horizon

In providing an overview of the conceptual and political relationship between the idea/ideal of the commons and neoliberalism (as ideology, as process, and as period), I have sought to demonstrate that, while often mobilized as diametric opposites, these two terms in fact reflect and refract each other in complex theoretical and material ways. I’ve outlined a theory of ‘enclosure 3.0’, a neoliberal form of enclosure that reaches expansively across the globe and intensively into daily life and the imagination. But I do not wish to echo or amplify a cynicism, so germane to neoliberal times, that would dissuade us from commitment or action. In spite of these new challenges, those who would oppose neoliberal capitalism must hold fast to the commons in at least three valences, all the while recognizing, in dialectical fashion, that none are pure or uncompromised.

First, we must hold fast to the actuality of the commons. By this I mean both the commons of the ‘natural’ world (watersheds, oceans, forests, climate) and the ‘built’ commons (community gardens, housing cooperatives, reclaimed factories, certain forms of free and open source software and peer-production systems, etc.). They are the bedrock of resistance to and transcendence of neoliberalism because in their use, care and defence we cultivate, express and render militant non-capitalist values (de Angelis 2007; Haiven 2014). These also provide the necessities and pleasures of life within, against and beyond the capitalist order and, as such, reduce our dependency on exploitative and oppressive systems.

Second, we must recognize that commons do not simply exist but are always under intentional cultivation. This is why Linebaugh (2014) and others insist we see commons as spaces or times animated by acts of commoning: the intentional and strategic development of common values, practices and forms. Hence, what separates a commons-based project from a sharing economy-based project is that the former is instilled with and renders militant the values of collaboration, horizontalism, direct democracy, member-participation, egalitarianism, anti-oppression, and the radical imagination, whereas the latter simply mobilizes these principles piecemeal to commodify another aspect of life. Recognizing the spirit of the commons also demands we acknowledge that all our relationships and social institutions are, in fact, undergirded and, indeed, dependent on what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) call the ‘undercommons’: that network of insurgent,
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unruly commoning activity that is occurring even in the most oppressive and enclosing of institutions, where we mobilize mundane solidarities and creative cooperation to struggle within, against and beyond exploitation. As such the spirit of the commons must also always be the spirit of refusal: the rebellion against the reorientation of our energies, time and cooperative capacities towards the reproduction of oppression, exploitation and a destructive system (see Holloway 2002).

Finally, we must continue to envision the commons of the future as a receding horizon. If we understand the commons not as a noun but as a verb it is an activity without end, without limit. Even after we avenge ourselves on neoliberalism (as is patently necessary), the work of building and rebuilding the commons throughout the field of social life will be a continual process and project. That is, all social institutions, even ones already deemed ‘commons’, will need to be constantly revolutionized to maintain their living dynamism, democratic character, egalitarian ethos and participatory, grassroots character. They will also need to be constantly and actively defended against re-enclosure and more subtle forms of conscription within the reproduction of capital, which we know to be endlessly adaptive, especially amid crisis. Such a recognition need not lead to fatalism but rather should focus our attention on the prefigurative (Day 2005) and iterative qualities of struggle against the neoliberal despair machine.

In a sense, the commons are and have always been our fate. The question now is: who will organize them and on what terms? Presently, the commons risk being conscripted to and subsumed under a vicious and systemically suicidal neoliberal globalization that relies on grassroots participatory forms to ‘externalize’ the costs of its reckless, endless expansion (de Angelis 2007; McMurtry 1999, 2002). Already, fascistic and reactionary forces around the world are responding by conscripting the commons to serve nationalist, religious or ethnic fundamentalism and provide a means of reproduction in the ruins neoliberalism leaves behind. Thus it is more urgent than ever that we define and develop militant theories, practices and networks of the commons capable of envisioning and bringing about egalitarian democratic and peaceful futures.

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Note

1 A wealth of such analyses can be found in the annals of the journal *The Commoner*, edited by Massimo de Angelis, at www.commoner.org.uk

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