

The Commons as a New Paradigm of Economics, Politics, and Culture

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From *The New Possible: Visions of Our World beyond Crisis* Chapter 10

Let's remember 2020 as the year biological realities reasserted a more prominent, overriding role in the course of human affairs. The natural world warns us anew—with pointed urgency—that we are on the wrong track. It turns out that our audacious human inventions like the economy, state power, and technology are not autonomous machines that exist outside of history or the natural order. We are actually biological creatures, not just citizens or versions of *homo economicus* (the economic agent who rationalizes all choices toward economic gain). This is a shock to our consciousness because, as moderns, we do not readily acknowledge that we are profoundly interdependent on other organisms.

We thus face a new existential challenge: How can we make our modern, materialistic culture more compatible with a living, evolving planet? Despite our pretensions as champions of the Enlightenment, human life will not survive unless it moves more fully into sync with the ecological imperatives of the planet.

This insight requires us to probe more deeply into the nature of our political economy and culture. For mainstream players, the elephant in the room is neoliberal capitalism. By “capitalism,” I don't just mean grand abstractions and macro-structures that seem quite divorced from our ordinary lives. The truth is quite the opposite: we are deeply implicated, personally, in the everyday practices and values fostered by capitalism. Yet there is no easy way to step outside of this pervasive system and its cultural categories and norms.

This is partly why the pandemic is so traumatic. COVID-19 is calling into question some basic conceits of modern life. Our faith in individualism over community, in humanity as separate from “nature,” and in economic growth as “progress,” are, quite simply, wrong. It's a bit superficial to say that the coronavirus is destroying the capitalist global economy. It's more accurate to say that it's destroying the epistemological edifice and cultural norms of “the economy” as we understand it.

If we are going to rebuild the world, we will need more than just new economic policies and governance institutions. We will need a new worldview, one that recognizes the world as a pulsating super-organism of living agents that happens to include humans. It will require that we shed the archaic foundational fictions of economics, for example, the fiction that defines human beings as self-interested utility-maximizers who are always seeking to increase material satisfaction.

In the biological world we inhabit, life is about striving for organic integration and wholeness. It is about deepening relationality and reciprocity. This is the deeper story of evolution, as it is explained by eco-philosophers like Andreas Weber. Highlighting these features of our reality is not simply an idle philosophical point. It's now a practical necessity. Present-day capitalism, which requires constant growth in order to avoid collapse, is going to destroy planetary ecosystems (and human civilization) within a few decades if it is not transformed or dismantled.

Fortunately, functional alternatives to capitalism already exist, most notably through the commons. But the social practices and ecological reasoning of commoning have little theoretical standing in respectable quarters, especially economics. Instead, our society's institutions continue to pay homage to the crumbling grand edifice of the market/state order, even though its structural deficiencies are becoming increasingly obvious.

The Deficiencies of the Market/State

COVID-19 and the 2008 financial crisis have drawn back the curtain on many myths used to justify the neoliberal capitalist narrative. It turns out that growth is not only impossible over the mid-term; it's also not widely or equitably shared. A rising tide does not raise all boats because the poor, the working class, and even the middle class do not benefit from the productivity gains, tax breaks, and equity appreciation that the wealthy enjoy. And yet taxpayers are commandeered to bail out banks and corporations that are "too big to fail" and to restore the supposed autonomy of "free markets."

The intensifying concentration of wealth is creating a new global plutocracy. Members of this elite group use their fortunes to dominate and corrupt democratic processes while insulating themselves from the ills afflicting everyone else. The "Invisible Hand" of the market was always a political fiction, but neoliberal policies of the past forty years have now made it a farce. This charade of commerce has systematically displaced costs and risks onto the poor, powerless social communities, ecosystems, and future generations. Inequality and precarity are expanding rapidly. Fear and resentment stoke white nationalism and authoritarianism under this economic strain. The market/state system and liberal democracy face a legitimacy crisis.

This is, of course, just a thumbnail account of a far more complex problem. But it's accurate enough to help us formulate a general critique. The growing inequities provide a compelling argument for a new socio-political imaginary that can go beyond what is on offer from the left or right. We need to imagine new sorts of post-capitalist governance and provisioning arrangements that can tame, transform, or replace predatory markets and capital accumulation and—in their place—support ecosystems, human care, social need, and personal development.

The regulatory state has failed to abate capitalism's relentless anti-ecological, anti-consumer, anti-social "externalities." Capital and financialization have eclipsed the power that the nation-state and citizen sovereignty once had to regulate the byproducts of market activity. The traditional left continues to believe, mistakenly, that warmed-over Keynesian economic policies, wealth redistribution, and social programs are politically achievable within existing the political regime—and likely to be effective. But in a democratic politics that is rigged and corrupted through campaign donations, social media disinformation, and problematic voting systems, it's getting harder to have faith in the efficacy of liberal representative democracy. These difficulties are compelling even apart from the realization that state bureaucracies and competitive markets are structurally incapable of addressing many societal problems. Their powers are too centralized, formal, and broad-gauged; they do not allow for the voices and initiatives of ordinary people. The limits of what "The System" can deliver on climate change, inequality, infrastructure, and democratic accountability have already been clearly demonstrated.

While the machinery of politics and government continues to function, its workings often amount to empty formalisms, symbolism, and staged propaganda. It resembles kabuki theater more than a robust vehicle for on-the-ground experimentation and collective action. It is fair to say that we now inhabit an "institutional void" of politics and policymaking. In the words of Dutch political scientist Maarten Hajer, "There are no clear rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures are to be agreed upon." He continues: "To be more precise, there are no generally accepted rules and norms according to which policy making and politics are to be conducted."¹

The Commons as a New Paradigm

The waning efficacy of the global market/state system has provoked countless activist and place-based communities around the world to develop a new path forward. These grassroots social movements take many forms: cooperatives, re-localization projects, food sovereignty, open source production, Transition Towns, degrowth, Social Solidarity Economy, care work, commons, and others. All of these movements emphasize different strategies with different styles, and yet the values of each overlap. All of them dissent from the grand neoliberal narrative of self-made individualism, expansive private property rights, economic growth, government deregulation, and consumerism.

While resistance to the neoliberal agenda is naturally a part of the shared agenda, these insurgent narratives—while diverse and sometimes fragmented—share a concern for building the actual

alternatives themselves, rather than relying on politics and policy to deliver what's needed.

System-change movements tend to share certain recurrent priorities:

- production and consumption for use as opposed to profit;
- bottom-up, decentralized decision making and social cooperation;
- stewardship of shared equity and predistribution of resources (i.e., by controlling equity assets themselves and not relying on state redistribution);
- an ethic of racial and gender inclusivism, transparency, and fairness;
- community, self-determination, and place-making over the purported imperatives of markets;
- a diversity of models adapted to local needs.

In these values we see a humanistic vision of society as a living, biodiverse system—not an inventory of resources to be allocated through government agencies. The bottom-up movements stress the importance of stewarding the earth and its ecosystems; the priority of people's basic needs over market exchange and capital accumulation; and the importance of participation, inclusion, and fairness in successful resource management and community governance.

While there are many idioms for talking about these concerns, I have found that the language of the commons is particularly powerful both in critiquing neoliberal capitalism and in constructing a new approach to life. The commons offers a language for reorienting our perceptions and understanding. It helps name and illuminate the destructive realities of market enclosure and the enlivening value of commoning together. Without the discourse of the commons, these two social realities remain culturally invisible or marginalized—and therefore politically less consequential.

The language of commons provides a way to make moral and political claims that conventional policy discourse—certainly the major political parties—ignore or suppress. Using the concepts and logic of the commons helps bring into being a new cohort of commoners who recognize our mutual affinities despite our differences. Seed sharers and open source programmers, urban commoners and alternative currency designers, can all assert their shared values and priorities in systemic terms.

The coherent philosophical narrative of the commons can help prevent capital from playing one interest off against another. We no longer have to make false choices: nature vs. labor, labor vs. consumers, consumers vs. the community. Through the language and experiences of commoning, people in different social roles can begin to see their common identities. It offers a holistic vision that helps diverse victims of market abuse recognize their shared victimization, develop a new narrative, cultivate new links of solidarity, and build a constellation of working alternatives driven by a different logic and ethic.

Institutional Innovations to Support Commoning

The discourse of the commons goes a long way toward helping re-imagine the institutions of governance and provisioning in the post-pandemic world. Crucially, the commons gets us beyond stale debates about socialism versus capitalism. Both of these systems rely on problematic, centralized, hierarchical systems controlled by state power. The point of the commons is to open up new vistas for distributed action and thought that neutralize or bypass the capital/state alliance, rigid bureaucratic systems, and top-down, policy-driven approaches to change.

The commons looks to initiatives that are socially driven and that distribute risks and benefits in a mutual way without the costly overhead and hierarchies of the market/state. Localized governance empowers us and works to prevent the corruptions of consolidated power. Bottom-up, peer-driven organization and innovation give people a voice and engender trust. When collective energies and wisdom are mobilized around shared goals, social solidarity and stability are nourished.

The pandemic has revealed the fragility of global supply chains. Commons—more self-contained, place-based systems of provisioning—have shown how resilience can be achieved. One need only look at community supported agriculture (CSA), community land trusts, and local currencies to find examples of effective strategies for re-localizing value chains. Through an ecosystem of local or regional commons, it's possible to de-commodify our productive assets by removing them from the circuits of capitalist exchange. We can make them less dependent on volatile,

expensive global markets (land, labor, technology), and we lessen dependence on outside finance by recirculating value locally (food provisioning, services, currencies, etc.).

CSAs are a time-proven finance technique for upfront sharing of the risk between users and producers. We know this as an agricultural finance tool, but in fact it can be utilized in many other contexts as well. In my region, many jazz fans subscribe to a series of jazz performances by paying upfront fees, CSA-style. Community land trusts (CLTs) are also a great way to de-commodify land. They take land off speculative markets permanently and mutualize the control and benefits of real estate. CLTs keep land under local control and use it for socially necessary purposes (for example, growing organic food locally) rather than for purposes favored by outside investors and markets.

The Schumacher Center for a New Economics has developed the notion of “Community Supported Industry,” a strategy that attempts to substitute local production for products imported through global or national markets. The local community helps local businesses flourish by providing land through CLTs, local investment, worker training and education, and many other forms of support.

Another way to foster re-localization is through “Convert-to-Commons” strategies. These are novel financial or policy mechanisms that help convert private assets used for making profits into assets for collective use. An example is the British law that gives communities the first right to bid on community assets like a beloved pub or building for purchase. Another strategy, known as “Exit to Community,” gives startup businesses an alternative to selling out to private investors or nasty big companies. Instead, they offer users or local communities the chance to purchase them.

Open source software communities have demonstrated new modes of production that are readily applicable to other realms. The idea is that national or global design communities can freely share and expand “light” knowledge—through open-source networks—while encouraging people to build the “heavy” (physical) stuff locally. This is sometimes called “cosmo-local production.”

There are already a number of exciting examples of cosmo-local production arising for motor vehicles (Wikispeed car), furniture (Open Office), houses (WikiHouse), agricultural equipment (Farm Hack; Open Source Ecology), electronics (Arduino), and much more. Public Lab is a citizen-science project that helps address environmental problems by providing open source hardware and software tools, such as monitoring kits. Although at present they are often fledgling systems, cosmo-local forms of production have enormous potential to minimize the carbon footprint of conventional production while reducing transportation and intellectual property costs.

A related form of innovation is platform co-operatives. Internet platforms don’t need to extract money from a community the way companies like Uber and Airbnb do. Rather, they can be vehicles for empowering workers and consumers. They can spur group creativity, reduce prices, and improve quality of life when they are designed and owned with the values of the commons in mind. Platform co-ops can improve operations and distribute market surpluses for the mutual benefit of participant-owners, instead of for absentee investors. We see examples of platform co-ops being used by taxi drivers in Austin, Texas (ATX Coop Taxi), food delivery workers in Berlin (Kolyamar-2), delivery and messaging workers in Barcelona (Mensakas), and freelance workers in Brussels (SMart).

It’s important that commoners can easily act as commoners without having to shoulder impossibly difficult or heroic burdens. That’s why we need new forms of commons-based infrastructure to readily enable commons-based solutions. Infrastructure—physical, legal, administrative—provides a framework that makes it easier for individual commoners to cooperate and share. One example is Guifi.net, a commons WiFi system in Catalonia, Spain that has more than thirty thousand Internet nodes. Guifi.net provides high-quality, affordable service that avoids the predatory prices and business practices of corporate broadband and WiFi systems. Another interesting infrastructure project is the Omni Commons, an Oakland building that provides offices, studios, and meeting spaces for artisans, hackers, social entrepreneurs, and activists.

Beyond infrastructure, commoners will eventually need to rethink how law and policy can support commoning. This is a complicated topic because state power is generally more interested in

promoting businesses and economic growth (to boost taxes and create jobs), even though commons can make a region more resilient, stable, and able to meet everyone's needs. Nevertheless, there is currently a great deal of interest in many cities—Amsterdam, Barcelona, Bologna, Seoul, San Francisco, among others—in creating urban commons as a counterpoint to top-down investment and speculation. Among other examples, rich fields of experimentation have recently emerged in the creation and management of public spaces, urban agriculture, public transport, social services, public events, and more.

We also need to reimagine conventional finance to support the distinctive work of commons. We need community-supported pools of money that are not encumbered with the growth imperatives that conventional interest-bearing debt and shareholder equity require. Fortunately, there are already many hardy examples to build upon: mutual aid societies and insurance, crowd-gifting and crowd-equity, financial models developed by community land trusts, CSA farming, and cooperative finance.

Commoning as a Way Forward

The strength of the commons lies in its core principles, porous boundaries, and endless permutations of possibility. These are core elements of any living system—especially social movements! And that's what makes the commons so valuable in dealing with COVID-19. We can begin to prioritize our biological, ecological, and creaturely needs. We don't need to remain hostage to a totalistic market/state system that is proving increasingly ill-suited for our lives and times. We can in fact leverage vernacular practice and culture to meet our needs in new ways. We can pursue serious transformations in provisioning, governance, and culture. We can re-imagine the configuration of state power and redefine the scope of economics to include our full humanity and social relations. Commoning nourishes people's instinctive needs for human connection and meaning, something that neither the current state or market can do.

The commons paradigm represents a deep philosophical critique of neoliberal economics and modern life, offering hundreds of functioning examples on which theorists and practitioners can build. Still, as an action-oriented approach to system change, it does not move forward automatically. Everything depends upon the ongoing energy and imagination that actual and would-be commoners contribute. Everything depends upon developing better infrastructures, legal regimes, and financial systems to facilitate the growth of commoning.

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.” As a living system, commoning speaks to the heart in ways that ideologies do not. Its rhythms are producing a lot of vibrations. The question for the future is what types of new living institutions and social forms the resonance of commoning will catalyze.

References

1 Hajer, Maarten. “Policy without Polity? Policy Analysis and the Institutional Void.” *Policy Sciences* 36.2 (2003) 175–95.

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