



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

How can we construct the commons?

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1. Commons and the politics of knowledge

NM: From the start of our exchanges two key themes have been important: first, historical and contemporary efforts to create or preserve common resources against a backdrop of proliferating forms of enclosure and private ownership. And second, the politics of knowledge - the issue of how equality can be enacted in the process of creating change. In domains as distinct as access to water, the privatisation of the universities, the enclosure of fields once used for common grazing, and the address of food security questions these two themes come together when we try to move beyond resistance, toward creating alternatives.

For us, commons has provided a vibrant platform for negotiating these issues. Whilst it can be problematic when this term is made to count for too much, or to connect too many discrete struggles, commons provides a way of linking land (and other resources) with labour whilst refusing the pervasive economic dogma of perpetual growth. To struggle for commons is to contest the first principles of liberal understandings of rights, especially the idea that we cannot have vibrant socioeconomic systems without a concept of private property. It is to struggle for equality, and this not only as a long-term outcome, but as a presupposed axiom, as the political philosopher Jacques Rancière puts it: a starting assumption that every speaking being is on a level when it comes to making sense of the world. For Rancière it's intellectual hierarchies that make some peoples' views

seem worth listening to, while others appear only as noise. *Whose commons* is at stake within contemporary dramas of environmental degradation? What if one version of commons (eg. the knowledge commons) destroys another form of common life?¹ Creating commons requires an understanding of gaps and rifts in translation, and a recognition that *plurality* of commons are at stake.

2. Commons as practice/experiment

PB: I have heard it said more and more that the commons means too many things. While there are problems with this, there is also something positive about the up-swelling of intellectual and practical interest in the commons as an alternative form of social and ecological life. When not only (neo)liberal capitalism but a whole range of modern institutions and concepts (the state, wage labour, market, property, individual) appear insufficient to address contemporary social and ecological crises it is not surprising that the process of developing new tools will be experimental, contested and unclear. It is seems necessary to draw on as many influences and experiences (history, anthropology, biology, social movements) as possible to imagine a way onwards. I think we both share the position that intellectual and practical work cannot content itself with merely denouncing contemporary capitalism/power; it works on constructing something else, new commons.

If we are serious about the commons as a new paradigm for organizing social life, we need to be able to describe and understand the “how” and the “what” of the commons. The commons, as I understand it, springs from people devising practical solutions to concrete questions rather than from any clear or overarching strategy. Where the most interesting work is taking place on the commons is where it is grounded in the empirical or practical forms it takes. This is where the commons emerges from - always a step ahead of the intellectuals, always tied up with a living, material politics.

3. Whose knowledge counts?

NM: Yes, and your point raises the problem of the privilege associated with scholarly and scientific forms of expertise. Whose knowledge counts in the making of ecological futures? This is a key question asked by the Soil Seeds and Social Change (SSSC) collective in Bristol I have recently helped form. As social scientists, artists, scientists, community groups and activists working together we aim to create a platform where different forms of expertise can be brought into. Through reading groups and "show-and-tell" workshops we are exploring the diverse ways that knowledge is made about soil and seeds, and how these different forms translate and travel - or do not do so. In my work in El Salvador alongside food justice activists the politics of this approach demands more than translating *campesino* knowledge into policy spheres. Instead it calls for transformation to the way that authority is granted in relation to environments and natural resources. Commons will not be created if we are content to describe how inequality it reproduced, or to “add” the excluded back in. Fundamentally, true socio-ecological alternatives will *perform equality* into networks of production, reproduction, distribution, and translation. This means cultivating an ethic of listening and attention to claims already being made, and addressing the hierarchies of knowledge production within our own institutional contexts.

¹ In the Amazon basin, for example, I think of the controversial case of Ayahuasca, where companies in the U.S sought to patent and privatise the traditional knowledges of the plant long preserved by indigenous peoples.

This emphasis recalls feminist accounts of social reproduction, where the contributions of women are presented back into an economy that has forgotten to include care, domestic labour, and gift in its calculations. In the El Salvador context it also means a valorisation of *in situ* agro-ecological understandings, lay knowledges, and the ethical principles which undergird them. Changing what we value as knowledge here affects the future *bios* of seeds and the composition of soil as much as the distribution of economic wealth. It also requires an active humility on the part of those of us writing from perspectives informed by the long histories of western thought. As we work to construct commons we may want to privilege "indigenous" techniques and claims by virtue of their "closeness" to the earth. Yet, in doing so are we really allowing other ontologies of nature - that is, ways of knowing and saying the more-than-human world - to figure within our accounts of resource politics?² Doesn't this idea of "closeness" to nature also betray a very western longing for pre-civilisational simplicity, and does it not also tie indigenous forms of expertise and knowledge to the long-lost past, as Bruce Braun warns? What would it mean to organise and theorise in relation to the current plural crises whilst acknowledging that the "commons" to be defended have disagreement at their heart?

4. Commons and enclosure

PB: Yes, and at once this points us to history and the long, ongoing struggle between the manifold commons and the new techniques of enclosure - from land enclosure to bio-genetic enclosure, and intellectual enclosure too. This helps us to see the two sides of what we have been discussing: the reproduction of the commons as well as the need to produce a politics of the common as a claim of equality against the hierarchies of knowledge and power which enact enclosure.

In Dublin, I have been doing co-research on the new independent spaces that have emerged over the past seven or eight years. These spaces are not part of the European autonomous tradition of squats or social centres. In general, they do not have any explicit politics but have emerged as pragmatic, concrete responses to the rise in rents, privatization and policing of public spaces which have enclosed the city over the last decade. Groups of people sharing the burden of rent for such spaces by splitting them into studios or hosting events - dinners, gigs or talks. While it is possible to discuss these new urban spaces as forms of urban commons, or urban "commoning", it's important that they do not operate outside of the ongoing neoliberal capitalist dynamics they have sought to escape. New ways of producing and managing urban space are being created and experimented with, but each opening can be very short-lived. They are shut down by the next new wave of property development, for not being able to afford the high cost of fire safety, or for cultivating "anti-social behaviour."³

The work I have been doing with another researcher has been to understand how these spaces are being run alongside the participants, so as to collaboratively reflect on common problems. Through this process we hope to move toward the construction of common notions and actions able to transform the situation.

² That is to say, we can't presume that underpinning these diverse forms of knowledge lies one given nature. This is why anthropologists like Eduardo Viveiros de Castro use the term "multi-naturalism" - beyond the idea that there are many cultures interpreting one given nature, he insists that there are many natures; many different accounts of the natural world, its genesis and ethical demands on us.

³ I.e. attracting people and behaviour that is not in keeping with a commercial or tourist-friendly culture.

This process has also involved addressing some very difficult obstacles. One space in Dublin was recently shut down by the City Council on the grounds that it was fostering anti-social behaviour. As this happened it became apparent that the organization was not strong enough to mount any form of effective resistance. One of the major weaknesses that the collective subsequently identified was that a "low cost of entry" means a "low cost of exit." In other words, because of the commitment to complete openness people come and go without building strong social solidarities. The "community" of users is constantly in flux, so that when it comes to defending or sustaining the space, the organizational infrastructure may be very fragile. This is something for the people in a space to figure out, but precarity and mobility also define conditions of city life today. Precarity is not an ethical choice, it is also a material condition imposed on us by contemporary capitalism, and is not easily overcome.

5. Rural and urban commons

NM: Yes - precarity is an enormously important material condition to acknowledge when theorizing the commons. Attending to such frailties helps us avoid romanticising the commons and to turn instead to the messy practicalities of expanding the possibilities for common life.

I do also see such exciting developments in contemporary *rural* politics and social movements. I am thinking particularly of the development of "food sovereignty" as a campaign and political concept⁴. Asserting food sovereignty - a term more problematic in its English translation for its connotations with *state* sovereignty - is to assert the rights of small-scale farmers to maintain their livelihood, and to determine what and how they grow. Such claims invoke new transnational associations and networks as much as making a renewed place for tradition. However, as in the city, conditions of precarious labour challenge attempts to organise in these terms, and effective forms of association are not easily forged. There are questions of scale to be addressed (whose autonomy is being defended, and what is the role of the state?), and very different articulations of "peasantness" within the contemporary world.⁵ I am most interested in the way that movements like *Via Campesina* are themselves resolving radical differences of position, context, religious culture, language and understanding. The emphasis on the necessary *process* for making decisions as a diverse body which nevertheless make concrete demands on governmental bodies seems to yield exactly the kind of understanding needed to create commons as part of a Degrowth agenda.

PB: Yet *Via Campesina* was not only a response to global neoliberal agricultural policies but also to the idea of "food security". Food security aspires to ensure that all people have access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. This in itself is no evil: the problem is that it does not address the question of production and thus can easily fit within

⁴ Introduced by the transnational alliance of peasants and land-workers *La Via Campesina* (peasant's way), food sovereignty constituted a rejection and reworking of food security as it was being conceptualised in UN forums during the 1990s. Proponents of food sovereignty reject the fixation on markets as a solution to global poverty. They insist that allowing the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to press-gang poorer countries to convert land used for subsistence farming into large scale agro-commerce was never going to create viable economic or ecological futures.

⁵ The recent critical dialogue on food sovereignty I attended at Den Haag in the Netherlands - itself a reiteration of a very successful event in Yale, U.S.A, last year - was highly illustrative of such tensions. Whilst there were hugely fruitful conversations concerning the repeasantisation of regions like Europe and the future of food justice, there were also moments of disjuncture. Responding to the question of the status of food sovereignty within contemporary social science, some *Via Campesina* activists and farmers questioned the status of academia within food sovereignty campaigns. What does academia really add to these social movements? How can critical social science ground itself in the struggles of people?

productivist, pro agro-industry policies that imagine solving the global hunger through intensification. Food sovereignty is important in terms of social and environmental justice because it begins with production, alongside with the small-scale producers. I would be interested in exploring further to what extent this concept and movement is able to build relations also with those who consume or buy the food - alternatives that incorporate production, distribution *and* consumption. During recent research and teaching in Vietnam, Morocco and Bolivia, I was struck by the existence of markets in all the big cities. These markets have expanded over the past two decades as the urban population has expanded. They are a vital mediating point between *campesinos* (and rural commons) and the urban proletariat (dispossessed from rural areas for the most part), and as such form “commons” even if they are markets (commercial). It is interesting, then, to see how urban regeneration is enclosing such nodes of urban-rural encounter. This ultimately impacts both on small-scale farmers (who sell in these largely unregulated, informal markets) and the people who buy there (who can't afford to buy from the large multinationals).

Finally, I'm glad you raised the point about scale and the relationship between the commons and the state/public. We can't simply ignore that more than half the world's population live in cities, in worsening conditions. The scale of intervention required to provide water, sanitation, food, health care for these new dispossessed is colossal - something which raises, again, the need to re-invent the commons, or think what a commons-public would look like.

Whilst we have set out, then, our view of an emerging Degrowth agenda in terms of the commons, we are left with a number of important questions and threads for further discussion:

- How do we create commons?
- Whose knowledge counts in the making of ecological futures?-
- Does the commons mean too many things? What does this signify?
- What is the relationship between the commons and the public?
- What similarities and/or differences are there between historically rooted, rural commons and the new urban commons? Is it helpful to think of them together?
- How can critical social science ground itself in the struggles of people?
- Is it more productive to think of the commons as territorial forms of social organization or as relations across and between spaces?