

In Common



The spirit of the commons

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*You cannot buy the revolution. You cannot make the revolution.
You can only be the revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere.*

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

*Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be
established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself.
We call communism the real movement which abolishes the
present state of things. The conditions of this movement result
from the premises now in existence.*

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*

Imagining a world beyond the social and ecological miseries of today often seems to be an impossible task. How can we possibly overcome the immensity of capitalist exploitation? A system that endlessly accumulates profit at the expense of everything else: our livelihoods, our dignity, our joy and our survival on a planet. Where can we even begin to imagine a different world, let alone build it? Much of anticapitalist organising has been fixated on the future; a revolution will one day come. At the same time, we have been too afraid to dream. Capitalist realism, as described by theorist Mark Fisher, has us believe that “not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system”, but also “that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it”.¹ When we do envision a decolonial postcapitalist world, it is always in the far-distant future. The possibility of reaching that world is obstructed—plagued by impossibilities, losses and impotence. We have been robbed of our ability to imagine and build a postcapitalist world. But we can reignite our radical creativity: to dream, imagine and plan postcapitalist futures.

Alongside the resurgence of utopian and futurist thought and aesthetics, the notion of the commons has emerged in theorising and systematising postcapitalist futures. The premise of many of these imaginings is that the future is immanent, inscribed into the present constitution of the world. In the process of re-envisioning the world, the intrinsic presence of utopian futures is accentuated. Spaces of hope open up. These are spaces for building and experimenting with postcapitalist worlds and commons.

The presence of the postcapitalist commons is attested to in all of us, a presence that mundanely emerges from the nature of our hearts. It is there in cooking a meal for your whānau, supporting a friend or in helping a stranger. It is there in the tears and sense of loss that you feel when a person you've never met loses a home, friend, family or a life.² All along, the answer has resided in ourselves. Sociality is at the heart of what we do; that is, to be wrapped in communities and social bonds, to be surrounded and mediated by other people. We are born into a world of care from others, we live and leave in our care for and by others. What we must do now is translate that innate and ever-present sociality into the way in which our lives are structured and organised. In revisiting the commons against its generic definition of shared resources—but rather as a *social system*—we can begin not only to conceptualise but to assemble postcapitalism.

All past, present and future commons, however, must not discount the centrality of reproduction and reproductive commons. This is a commons that recognises the imperative of reproduction of everyday life and the general conditions of living, such as care, food, education, energy and housing. In the words of Marxist feminist scholar Silvia Federici,

a new world and a new politics are in the making ... resignifying it is not only a wealth to be shared but as a commitment to the principle that this life we have should be a *vida digna de ser vivida*; a life, that is, worthy of being lived. At its centre ... are the reproduction of material life, its care, and the reappropriation of wealth collectively produced, organised in a way that is subversive; for it is based on the possibility to “articulate human activity and creativity for autonomous acts”.³

As Federici notes, commons are often defined as a pool of shared resources. While it is certainly a component, the commons are not reducible to the sharing or management of resources. In other words, it is not commons qua commons. More precisely, commons are social systems. The commons is its own organising system and mode of production that encompasses shared resources, or what Massimo De Angelis, a political economy scholar, defines as “commonwealth”⁴

The commons convert what is already part of our everyday lives—generosity, reciprocity and sociality—into a new way of structurally organising human lives. Where the telos of capitalism is the valorisation of value, money begetting more money, for the commons it is the reproduction of life, of autonomy from and against capital. It is the creation of a new mode of production that limits capital and constructs alternatives. In other words, commons are sites of material autonomy in general conditions of living as listed above. It is both the production and reproduction of social relations, and the social practices that reproduce those relations.

Building postcapitalism begins by expanding the noncapitalist and anticapitalist relations that inhere in our very existence; the anticapitalism from which our lives began and through which our lives are reproduced. It is against capitalist relations of alienation, competition, individualism and exploitation. It is a process of building on our love, dignity, solidarity and conviviality, and projecting these externally. The task today, a task that has been globally set in motion numerous times before, is to expand this intrinsic sociality into a social system, into the commons.


History attests that commoning has been and continues to be the organising principle of human existence: whether that be common land tenures in England prior to the land enclosures of the early 20th century, communal systems and commoning relations among indigenous peoples of Latin America, Africa and Asia, or the remainders of eroded communally based societies and commons, including precolonial Aotearoa.⁵ There is much to learn from around the world: Greek self-organised clinics, Cochabamba (Bolivian) community water associations, Zapatista's territorialisation of Chiapas, CopyLeft, the famous Occupy movement or the development of the ecological and tikanga Māori systems of Ngāi Tūhoe.⁶ These are only some of the myriad sites of struggle and activities of commoning.

The spirit of the commons is in all of us. That is to say, in our inherent sociality we all have the capacity to be commoners.⁷ The work now and ahead is not easy or simple. As with any political work, commoning is filled with disagreements and commonalities. In our differences, however, we find unity. A unity driven by the desire for a better world and the coming together to assemble that world against multiple systems of exploitation and oppression: capitalism, colonisation, patriarchy, racism and speciesism.⁸ Commoning is the act of coming together and creating a world that is rooted not in profit-making but in whanaungatanga, in our generosity and reciprocity to one another. It is a world that we envision, a world that we paradoxically both already live *in* and one that lies *beyond* this capitalist hell. The path forward is to collectively build this immanent transcendence, to expand both what ought to be and what, in spite of everything, already is.

Omnia sunt communia.

Endnotes

- 1 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2.
- 2 Commons, however, are irreducible to the mundane acts of care, such as cooking dinner. Rather, a commons system guided by generosity, reciprocity and sociality are the same principles that are immanent in our quotidian practices.
- 3 Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 146.
- 4 Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2017).
- 5 Federici, *Re-Enchanting*.
- 6 For further examples see, Federici, *Re-Enchanting*; De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*; and Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016).
- 7 The act of producing and reproducing the commons.
- 8 In other words, “no one of us can be free until everybody is free”.

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