

The Commons as a Radical Democratic Project

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Introduction

In a recent book edited by David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (*The Wealth of the Commons* 2012), the two authors say that the commons can be seen as an intellectual framework, a political philosophy, a set of social attitudes and commitments, an experiential way of being, a spiritual disposition, an overarching worldview, a language that helps us escape the dead-end of market fundamentalism; in other words, the concept of the commons has many interpretations.

While it is all very well that the commons have inspired many strands of thinking and many types of action, if we are interested in fostering social change then our objective should be to sift through these 'thousand flowers in bloom' in search of identifying a set of principles that have transformative potential. My intention is to say something about the potential of the commons as a political project. In the first part I draw from the work of Elinor Ostrom to derive key principles of the commons as a political project. In the second part I reflect on what I see as problematic in the current literature on the commons and in the third part I develop an argument about one way in which the commons could be a radical democratic project.

Heritage of Elinor Ostrom

First of all, let me say where I am coming from in this debate on the commons. I have been studying Elinor Ostrom's work (*Governing the Commons* 1990) for some years now, only to witness it recently propelled into something far bigger and broader than she ever might have anticipated. In my view, several aspects of her work are important in developing the commons paradigm as a political project.

The first one is her idea of the human being as 'better than rational'. This concept does not deny that we are rational beings which are striving to exercise some control over our lives. However, this concept denies the deeply pessimistic premise of the rational actor theory according to which all choices in life boil down to a rational calculus of costs and benefits. It says that we are 'not only rational', in that our actions and choices are deeply imbedded in norms and social relations. It offers up a vision of humans as deeply social: communicative, trustworthy and cooperative. In contrast to the neoclassical economics perspective which starts from the premise that collective action will not happen or is doomed to fail in some sort of tragedy of the commons, the implication of Ostrom's empirical and theoretical work is that people are naturally social actors. We live in a web of social relations infused with norms and values; we are intrinsically cooperative and as a result collective action is possible and may lead to sustainable and equitable governance practices. Without such a concept of humankind we have no business trying to theorise emancipatory social change.

That is the first lesson from Ostrom's work. The second refers to the principles of institutional design, and the third to the relationship of the commons towards the markets/states dichotomy.

With regard the principles of institutional design, Ostrom's work warns us that it is not easy to design institutions (here institutions simply stand for rules for collective action) which will bring about sustainable governance. This is true irrespective of whether we are trying to govern natural resources or maintain the welfare state. We need no further evidence for this than the fact of gross social and economic inequalities in contemporary societies, as well as the rapid and seemingly unstoppable destruction of our natural habitat. Ostrom's work showed that for collective action to bring about sustainable and equitable governance regimes it needs to be deeply democratic, reliant on self-organisation and based in the principle of subsidiarity. Irrespective of whether the context is one of organising the production process in a factory or designing mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making in the local community – the basic principle in how we should design binding rules that govern collective action should be democratic deliberation. Democracy is here both the method: the procedural principle which makes institutions legitimate, and the goal: whereby institutions should work in the interest of the people.

The third implication of Ostrom's work refers to using the concept of the commons in order to criticise the classical dichotomy of states and markets. Her main point was that both regulation by the state and regulation through private property rights are institutional solutions that are imposed on communities in a top-down process. She argued against the centralised Leviathan as a good way of regulating natural resources, and also against privatization as way of managing common resources such as forests or fisheries. Instead, she studied and theorised examples of collective action whereby communities organized themselves into sustainable self-managed cooperatives. Ostrom herself did not suggest that we need to bring down capitalism or for the state to wither away; she advocated commons governance principles as complementary to them. In some situations, she argued, the best way of managing resources was through self-organisation and collective ownership rights. As for the role of the state, in her conception the states should enable the flourishing of various forms of self-organisation and self-management in communities.

Now, while the first two principles of human cooperativeness and democracy as both the method and the goal represent crucial ingredients of the commons as a radical democratic project, the implication of Ostrom's work with respect to criticising the roles of states and markets is a bit more complicated, and deserves further elaboration since some of its inherent tensions are continuously reproduced in the contemporary discourse of the commons.

Limits and potentials of the theory of the commons

Contemporary commons discourse draws on the principles that I have just described. As a result, in my view the key strengths of the current commons movement are:

1. advocacy of democratic principles of horizontal self-government and participatory rule-making;
2. underlying the cooperativeness of humankind as well as a needs-based philosophy of society as opposed to an interest-based one;
3. critique of capitalism and the state.

By relying on these principles, the commons literature has analysed and described processes of privatization and expropriation, showing how common resources or public goods are being commodified, while the state takes care of unwanted externalities in a form of 'palliative care'. Social movements have drawn analytical strength and political traction by framing these processes as ones of unjust enclosures. We have witnessed successful commons movements in Italy (referendum on water), Uruguay (referendum against the privatization of water in 2004), and locally in Croatia with The Right to the City initiatives, the Independent Student Initiative, as well as initiatives opposing the privatization of natural resources.

Though the commons framework is successfully used to critique primarily the market and then the failures of representative democracy, it is in this element of the commons discourse that I find the most problems as well. I would say that while the principle of democratic deliberation and a concept of humans as social, cooperative beings are the strong points of the commons discourse, its critique of the market and state relations is incomplete. First of all, a lot of this critique is vague in terms of in which direction it looks for solutions. Here I am not sure whether this is a purposive strategy. Is this vagueness an attempt to steer away from the 'value laden' concepts of socialism, self-management (Yugoslav-style), and finally, a close namesake and the elephant in the room: communism?

However, this problem is not primarily one of naming. It is often unclear in this literature whether we are looking to abandon capitalism, or simply to complement it with commoning practices. Many initiatives in the commons movement look towards reducing the reach of markets in our lives, but they are not proposing to transform the logic of capitalism. Using Fraser's typology of affirmative and transformative struggles (2003), these types of action are affirmative since they only tend to some of the consequences, but they leave the underlying structure intact. Another example illustrating the difference between these types of struggles would be between fighting to increase unemployment benefits versus fighting to reduce or eradicate unemployment altogether. The same objection is also true of the critique of the state that is formulated within the commons discourse. It criticises the state for its top-down approach, centralisation and bureaucratisation, as well as for its collusion with the interests of capital. However, having said that, its position with respect to the role of the state is ambivalent: are we aiming to profoundly transform the state, or should our strengths be devoted to developing various commoning practices outside the domain of the state, in some sort of parallel processes and autonomous zones?

Therefore, while the commons discourse offers a critique of capitalism and the inadequacies of representative democracy, the solutions it proposes often seem inadequate for addressing the problems at hand. It suggests the developing of alternative practices outside both the market and state domains: growing our own vegetables, creating communal kindergartens where we will take turns babysitting our children, participating in our local government, or developing workplace democracy through participatory governance of factories. While all these initiatives may be worthwhile in affirming alternative principles of humanity based on sharing and solidarity - on their own they represent a-political, fragmented actions that cannot address the underlying structural logic of problems at hand. To be blunt, we may have hundreds of worker-owned factories, but if they operate within a capitalist logic of production then we have not brought about a transformative social change towards radical egalitarian democracy.

The fact that the commons theory is weak in addressing the structural origins of injustice is not surprising, since Elinor Ostrom's work was based in methodological individualism whereby social outcomes are to be explained by understanding individual behaviour. Though we of course need a theory of agency in order to produce social change, the key dislocation is in whether we posit that the source of change should be in us modifying our behaviour by adopting alternative principles of cooperation and action, or whether our agency should be directed towards collective action aimed at altering both economic relations and the role of the state. I think we should go for the second option, and for that to happen, I argue that the commons discourse should become more explicitly political and grounded in the democratic process.

The commons as a radical democratic project

Aronowitz (2006) wrote about how existing social movements are often adverse to political organising and tactical thinking, which exacerbates left fragmentation and powerlessness. Because activists deeply mistrust the current political system and despise the political classes, they have practically embraced marginalization. While Aronowitz was referring to the situation in the US, it seems that the same thing could be said of Croatia.

In recent years in Croatia we have seen a flourishing of critical thinking, social movements, innovative organisational forms, contentious actions and artistic projects. Though they have grown in recent years, they have confined themselves to existing largely outside the political arena and on the margins of the public sphere. What has failed to materialise is a transformation of social movements into a political actor with substantial citizen support. This is the missing link, since any social change that aims to give more power to the people will be resisted. More power needs to be fought for – and in order to fight for we need three ingredients: social movements, a political actor and broad popular support. So far in Croatia we have only the first ingredient. Fragmented social movements on the left need to enter the political process and engender a political actor - a strong enough organisation without which, as Aronowitz says 'in complex societies effective interventions are next to impossible to implement'. In order to launch transformative changes, social and political mobilisation must be directed towards re-writing the rules of the game, and not by looking at areas where we can play outside the field. The commons movements that aim to exist outside both market and state domains are valuable in that they represent reservoirs of alternative practices and worldviews, but they need political articulation.

If we can engender such a political actor, then the commons paradigm can perhaps be used as a more neutral denominator for what is essentially a socialist project, resurrected and reinvented for the 21st century: whereby we reject both the capitalist mode of production and centralised state management in favour of a radically democratic and egalitarian society based in principles of social, environmental and political justice. In order to do this, we need a political strategy based in a combination of confrontation and compromise with existing institutions. We want to be able to confront the state with enough social power for it to be forced to concede substantial compromises. The idea is to create political mobilisation sufficient for introducing principles of radically extended democracy both in economic relations and the organisation of state power. This would mean opening existing political and economic institutions to citizen participation through various innovative policies such as citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, direct

democratic instruments, as well as basic social income, and workplace democracy, to name a few. These institutional changes, whose exact recipe should be the outcome of a deliberative social process, would I think help create the key ingredients for emancipatory struggles. If implemented, institutions such as basic social income, citizen assemblies and workplace democracy would - in Fraser's terms - have transformative effects in that they would increase social justice not through 'palliative' policies that do not disturb the underlying social structures, but that they would restructure the underlying configuration of power between markets, states and societies. That is how I understand social transformation – not as a binary switch from one system to another, but as a change in the basic configuration of power between the economy, the state and society. The commons as a radical democratic project would therefore stand for a re-configuration of power away from the economy and the state and towards society.

References

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