

The Commons

The commons as a field is not well established and there are few obvious classic texts. Hardin's famous essay "The Tragedy of the Commons" can likely make the strongest claim to be a classic in the field. This purely economic understanding of the commons in terms of public goods and open access or shared access resources is well established in neoclassical economics (Lessig). Hardin's argument that such commons regimes are prone to a collapse, and that private property can resolve the matter, is flawed. Angus argues that market incentives are the cause of the tragedy rather than the solution to it. Heller's "tragedy of the anti-commons" illustrates how property regimes can lead to inefficiency. Ostrom's work on the economics and governance of successful "common pool resource" regimes challenges the inevitable logic of ruin through overuse put forth by Hardin, and can reasonably be considered a second classic in the field.

Hardin's tragedy locates the commons within the horizon of capitalism, implicitly subordinating the commons to the motivations of actors in the market. Commons regimes are productive, but they are not only economic: they are created and sustained through social practices like those illuminated by the anthropological approaches of Mauss, Kely, and Hyde. Particularly in modern societies, these concepts slide into understandings of the public (a concept used by Kely) and the public sphere. Both are constructed through communication (Habermas; Anderson). Commons arrangements preexisted market economies. Polanyi details the destruction of the commons in England during the rise of capitalism, when industrial mass production substituted capitalist commodities for goods and activities formerly produced outside the market in communities reliant on commons arrangements. When these communities were destroyed by enclosures the commoners themselves were thrown onto the labor market (Linebaugh).

Today, most commons regimes for physical goods have been replaced by the market. The most celebrated instances of commons production concern information and ideas. Free and open source software in particular is frequently presented as the great success story of commons production (Chopra and Dexter; Kely; Weber). This example is prominent for a couple of reasons. First, software is information, to which special characteristics are ascribed, namely that it can be copied without diminishment and is in this sense not scarce – or, in economic terms, rivalrous. Second, information in general and software in particular is the subject of information society theory prevalent in neoliberal discourse and in radical responses to it.

As free software and other "immaterial" commons arrangements demonstrate the possibility for alternatives to market production, the idea of the commons is increasingly seized upon as a sometimes utopian hope. In the wake of the financial crisis this is further fuelled by eschatological visions of the future. Far from stabilizing, the concept of the commons may be becoming harder to pin down. The different understandings of the term are involved in a struggle over the concept and its relevance to contemporary society. Is the commons a way to take capitalism to the next level, as it were (Lessig; Jenkins), or does it offer an alternative (Ardisson, Bauwens and Peitersen; Bauwens)? This question of commons discourse is not well represented in my readings, but an illustration is present in the hopes of the autonomists.

Autonomist Marxists emphasize the role of immaterial labor in contemporary capitalism, characterizing the commons or "the common" as a liberatory alternative to capitalism (De Angelis; Dyer-Wetherford; Hardt and Negri). But, as autonomists also assert, commons arrangements are not simply alternatives to exclusive ownership and market exchange. The relationship between commons and capitalism is much more ambiguous. Non-market and commons activity are necessary for the reproduction of labor. Commons provide subsidies to capitalist activity (e.g. many forms of unpaid social labor), are a realm

subject to enclosure (Marx's primitive accumulation), and themselves serve as mechanisms through which labor and resources can be appropriated. The commons and capitalism thus have a dialectical relationship in which capitalism is dependent on the commons, while capitalists attempt to structure commons to be dependent on them and to fuel capital accumulation. The free software movement and capitalism have manoeuvred to co-opt each other: developers attempt to attract corporate involvement and contributions, while capitalists in turn strive to capture and enclose products and communities.

To step outside most of my readings (with the exception of Bollier), the question of the commons as an alternative must address physical production, not only immaterial work. This leads to questions of environmental sustainability and dwindling fossil fuel reserves. Although Hardin's original article remained bound within the horizons of capitalism, he was concerned with environmental limits to global human population. For him the tragedy of the commons could be solved by market relations. The hope for the commons today are that it may address failures of capitalism. Questions of the commons and technology must at some point wrestle with the matter of the environment. But that's not really present in the readings here.

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