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# The Commons and the Social and Solidarity Economy

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### *Abstract*

The concept of the commons or common goods has been incorporated into economic theory —along with those of public goods and private goods— largely due to the contributions of Elinor Ostrom in 1990 who, based on the empirical study of different forms of self-government that manage resources for common use, made its importance and specificity visible.

The debate has not ceased, and different re-elaborations have been carried out, proposing to take up the commons as a type of social relations through which people can propose shared goals and the mechanisms to achieve them, thus generating modes of existence with certain autonomy from the market and the state, rather than as a good or resource.

The heterogeneous experiences of self-management and self-organization centred on the production of the commons are beginning to arouse the interest of several authors as new ways to rethink antagonisms and social transformation. From this point of view, approaching the debate on the commons from the social and solidarity economy (SSE) could help to re-politicize and rethink the role that this economy could play in social change.

*Keywords:* production of commons; common resources; self-organization; enclosure and hoarding; collective action; community

## Introduction

The concept of the commons or common goods has been incorporated into economic theory —along with those of public goods and private goods— largely due to the contributions of Elinor Ostrom in 1990 who, based on the empirical study of different forms of self-government that manage resources for common use, made its importance and specificity visible.

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The heterogeneous experiences of self-management and self-organization centred on the production of the commons are beginning to arouse the interest of several authors as new ways to rethink antagonisms and social transformation. From this point of view, approaching the debate on the commons from the perspective of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) could help to re-politicize and rethink the role that the commons could play in social change.

### 1. Commons as Opportunity or Tragedy

The origin of the discussion on the commons can be traced back to the age-old discussion on individual behaviour and its collective/social effects. . The concept, however, evolved over the last half-century, starting with Garret Hardin's provocative article 'The Tragedy of the Commons' published in *Science* in 1968. The article discusses how the sum of rational behaviour at the individual level can result in irrational results at the societal level. Using an example of herders using a common pasture, it shows how everyone is driven to 'increase their livestock without limit, in a world that is limited' (Hardin 1968, 1244). Overgrazing, which results in the destruction of the rangeland, is the metaphor through which the tragedy of the commons is analyzed. Hardin's central argument about the commons can be found in a wide range of authors who analyze the particular relationship between individual choices/strategies and emergent collective outcomes.

The prisoner's dilemma — which comes from game theory — is perhaps the most widely used example to illustrate the difficulty of cooperation between rational and selfish human beings. It shows that, even if the players have all the information they need to be able to decide their strategy, because of the lack of communication between them, the decisions made produce the least desired outcome for both players. Olson (1965) even analyses this dilemma in mutually supportive groups, i.e. groups with self-recognized collective interests that still fail to deploy group-wide action to achieve the common benefit. What causes rational individuals to act against their group's interests? This could happen —according to the author— because some individuals —'free riders'— feel little incentive to voluntarily cooperate with the effort/cost involved in collective action since once the group goal is achieved, they will benefit from it anyway, whether they have participated or not. The paradox of collective action, then —similar to the tragedy of the commons proposed by Hardin— would be that if all individuals act in the same way, no one ends up benefiting.

Elinor Ostrom —winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics— warned in 1990 how, faced with the dilemmas posed by theories of rational action, political analysts, instead of rethinking the incentives necessary for cooperative behaviour, end up proposing solutions that are external to the commons. According to her, some political analysts recommend that the state should control most natural resources to avoid their destruction, while others suggest that their privatization will solve the problem. What is observed around the world, however, is that neither the state nor the market has been successful in getting individuals to sustain long-term, productive use of natural resource systems (Ostrom 2009, 25-26).

Ostrom takes up the dilemmas posed by Hardin, Olson and others to develop a theory of collective action, aiming to explain how individuals, using a common pool resource, can circumvent several of the problems outlined above by building capacities, agreements, binding contracts, and cooperative strategies that enable them to effectively direct and manage those resources.

With her theory of collective action, Ostrom systematized and empirically analyzed diverse institutions of self-organization and self-management of common-pool resources (CPR). Reviewing the theoretical models that methodologically start from individual rationality, she demonstrated that under certain circumstances individuals could generate their own mechanisms of regulation in a collective and socially rational manner. The approach to concrete cases allowed her to identify, from the contradictions of the processes studied, how in some contexts it was possible to appropriate common goods through different agreements. For Ostrom, institutional provision, credible commitments, and mutual supervision would explain to a large extent the creation of particular institutionalized ways of collective action with the capacity to manage common-pool resources sustainably. Through the different experiences analyzed, she identified some central principles to generate institutionally strong collective designs for CPR users. These would be: clearly defined boundaries of CPR, congruence between the resource environment and its governance structure or rule, effective agreements between resource appropriators, effective supervision and monitoring, gradual sanctions in case of non-compliance with agreements, low-cost and easy-to-access mechanisms for conflict resolution, and recognition of the right of the resource appropriators to self-govern, and in the case of larger CPR, rules organized and enforced through multiple layers of nested enterprises.

Based on these dynamics of commons management, Ostrom proposed to rethink public policy. 'If the theories used in political science do not include the possibility of self-organized collective action, then the importance of a court system used by self-organized groups to monitor and enforce contracts will not be recognized' (Ostrom 2001, 57). Furthermore, Ostrom warns that public policies based on the notion that all appropriators of CPRs are incompetent and therefore rules should be imposed on them may end up destroying the institutional capital that has been accumulated over years of experience in particular locations. CPRs include both natural and man-made systems, emphasizing the resources or assets that are manageable by self-organized groups. Ostrom's research findings and analysis on the governance of the commons have been taken up by renowned economists —such as the French economist Jean Tirole (2017) who has written his latest book on 'the economics of the commons' — but has also

become an indispensable reference in other disciplinary fields, thus feeding new reworking and problematizations.

Finally, Ostrom in her studies on the existence of different self-organization ways to manage resources for common use did not deny the validity of theories formulated by the tragedy of the commons which is based on individual rational actions. But she questioned their capacity for generalization and their universal character. In this sense, Ostrom suggested that common goods are not antagonistic to capital, but can coexist with public goods and privately owned goods.

## **2. The Commons from an antagonistic point of view**

With the neoliberal advance from the 1990s onwards, different European and North American authors highlighted different forms of resistance, re-appropriation, and recreation of the social relationship for the sustainability of collective life and nature reworked the debate on the commons from a critical and antagonistic perspective to capitalism. Within the SSE sector -especially in the cooperative sector- the sustainability crisis has been taken up. Many SSE organizations support the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. However, those considering the commons as antagonistic to capitalism started questioning the approach of these SSE organizations.

The antagonistic approach to the commons proposed a shift of the approach to the commons from the one centred around contradictions between capital-labour (based on the social relations structured on the relation with the means of production) to the one centred around the contradictions between capital-life (based on the social relations resulting from the relation with the means of production, but also from the modes of existence). It highlighted capitalist accumulation as a historical process that puts the very sustainability of life at risk. Through the analysis of the material and symbolic reproduction of life, i.e. life of humans and the whole environment, it explained capitalist accumulation as the development of strong individualistic rationality that destroys community networks and generates a tendency toward inequality. And it argued that capitalist accumulation and expansion are sustained by processes of commodification of nature, enclosure, dispossession and privatization of essential goods.

For instance, Silvia Federici explains that the commons existed a long time ago and the contemporary world retains many elements based on them. These 'communalizing practices that are created in emergency situations do not disappear without trace... they are part of our collective memory and our cultural symbols' (Federici 2020, 27-28). Federici argues that capitalism requires the destruction of communal goods and relations in order to develop its process of large-scale accumulation. One of the key examples is the enclosures that allowed the expropriation of English farmers from their land and commons, establishing the conditions for capitalist development in sixteenth-century Europe. It was a starting point of the historical process of accumulation that continues to act today, advancing on the means of production and also modes of existence. Federici pointed to both the separation of the producer from the means of production (to generate the wage society) and the re-functionalization of the means of existence (reproductive work to the sphere of 'the private'), as the beginning of two accumulation processes of the market society.

In the same vein, Laval and Dardot (2015) argue that what we are experiencing today is a tragedy of the uncommon, highlighting the contradiction created by the advance of capital over life. From a political economy perspective, they point out that the notion of common goods, although it makes visible the inadequacy of the public/private dichotomy, is a concept based on the neoclassical tradition since it separates the economic from the political. In this sense, Laval and Dardot propose to use the term 'commons' (instead of 'common goods') to emphasize the political use and meaning. To them, the commons is the political principle that defends the right of public/private non-appropriability through social practices and ways of life based on self-governance. The co-obligation of men and women engaged in public activity creates alternative practices to those practices based on the principle of competition and the dynamics of privatization of all spheres of life. In this way, the commons has a counter-hegemonic political movement to neoliberal rationality and its logics of accumulation, privatization and enclosure.

Hardt and Negri (2009), like Laval and Dardot, take up the commons from a political perspective. They argue that different experiences can lead to an overall process in which the multitude (i.e. all those who labour and produce under capitalism, which is not restricted to those associated with the traditional industrial working class but includes those with reproductive roles, the poor and the un(der)employed)) learns the art of self-government and invents durable forms of democratic organization. Hardt and Negri (2009, 10) understand the common as both the common wealth of the material world and the results of social production necessary for interaction and further production such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects, etc. Their idea of the common does not place humanity as something separate from nature. They focus on practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation. Hardt and Negri criticize that neoliberal government policies have established power over life and naturalized the argument that the only possibility of decision-making lies between the public/private dichotomy. Hardt and Negri proposed a counter-argument that there is also the common where there is a production of the subjectivity of individuals who resist power while not losing sight of their own individuality.

While for Hardt and Negri the common is understood mainly from the spontaneity of the multiple forms of connection, Laval and Dardot agree with Ostrom on the importance of creating a system of rules and norms that could institute new practices and forms of government. Further, they argued for the importance of implementing ways of radical democracy and direct participation beyond the representational logic on which delegative democracies are based. For her part, Federici (2020) suggests a bias in Hardt and Negri's approach which conceptualizes the common only from their views on the transformations of labour from Fordist (material labour) to post Fordist (immaterial labour), without managing to fully incorporate the spheres of reproduction and care.

Federici has also a critical view of the lack of practical advice on how the multitude wins the struggle. According to her, Hardt and Negri just urged patience, hoping for the event that will secure the multitude 'becoming prince', not offering any concrete practical advice to those in the movements or struggles for the common. For Federici, winning the struggle for the common demands the time-consuming, yet indispensable, work that is needed for organizing and reproducing what is otherwise short-lived, sensational moments of struggle.

From the perspective of seeing the common antagonistic to capital, the commons, as a free association of self-governed people with the aim of sustaining life, can become either a means to fight for a more cooperative society or become self-enclosed or re-functionalized by capitalism. The fact that the commons are not fully capitalist does not mean that they are anti-capitalist; far from being pure entities, they are produced, reproduced, updated. And the commons build up different perspectives of struggle on a daily basis.

In Latin American practices and discourses that understand coloniality/modernity as two sides of the same coin, the production of the common is mainly based on the practices of indigenous and peasant communalities. In this concept of the common, autonomy is highlighted to defend heterogeneity.

In this sense, with the study of the Ch'ixi world of Bolivia, Rivera Cusicanqui (2018) explains how heterogeneity of conceptions about space and time coexist in the present, different from the neoliberal linear proposal. The spatiotemporal multiplicity found in the Ch'ixi world enables different cosmovisions and forms of self-government. Rivera also highlights the importance of understanding 'the indigenous' from the current heterogeneity that characterizes its communitarian component, neither from a folkloric-homogeneous vision nor as a pre-capitalist economy. According to Rivera, it is from the daily plots and their collective memory —strongly orally transmitted — that the moments of Andean insurgency can be understood.

On the other hand, Gladys Tzul Tzul points out the power of Guatemalan indigenous governance where decisions are produced through deliberation and consent by the assembly. 'These are concrete and situated historical-social relations, which through a set of strategies and practices of the communal organization seek to conserve, share, defend and recover the territory from which to deploy the material means for the reproduction of life' (Tzul-Tzul 2018, 15). Everyday life finds in these communities formal spaces for decision-making by the assembly, but also non-assembly spaces for meeting, celebration, and work from where the common is inhabited and produced. From the study of these indigenous communities, Tzul Tzul shows the difference between politics centred on the citizen/individual and the politics that emanates from community networks and the production of commons.

While the wefts of relationships and social ties sustained over time are clearly visible in indigenous, native, and peasant communities in their way of (self-)regulating coexistence, as Gutiérrez (2015, 22) tells us, they are also present outside of them. 'They function below and partially outside of the state and capital accumulation, they have preserved and recreated colourful associative networks for the preservation and reproduction of life. Such wefts are the product of diverse conversations and coordination intertwined in an autonomous manner, establishing their own ends, scopes and activities' (Gutiérrez 2015, 110). According to Gutiérrez, community networks would be constellations of social relations —not harmonious or idyllic, but full of tensions and contradictions— that manage to operate in a coordinated and/or cooperative manner in a more or less stable way over time with multiple concrete objectives to satisfy the needs that make for the material and symbolic reproduction of human and non-human life.



In summary, the expansive creativity of living labor and the production of the common emerges both from social relations generated within capitalism and from experiences that inhabit the territory from multiple anticolonial, decolonial, or transcolonial cosmovisions. From Latin America —as a colonial context— the politics of the common is taken up again in terms of the ‘reproduction of life’, recognizing a multiplicity of interdependent relations that human beings produce between humans and with nature in order to reproduce our ways of life. In this sense, rather than proposing the commons as a destiny, they are taken up as a seedbed of intermittent alternative ‘modes’ — autonomous meanings that can strengthen their actions in moments of deepening social antagonism to capitalism.

### **3. The Commons and the social and solidarity economy**

The great transformation that explains how today's society has become a "market society" (Polanyi 1989) by basing its economy solely on a liberal conception, can be complemented by the vision of the commons as the new forms of capitalist exploitation affect bodies and territories. In this way, a heteronomous dynamic is configured, characterized by the enclosure and progressive privatization of all areas of life, with new cycles of appropriation of both the means of production and modes of existence. Making visible and taking up the different ways of producing the commons, allows us to tune in to the creative and autonomous capacity that in turn enables processes of politicization and with them new possible modes of subjectification. This autonomous project historically accompanies the experiences of the social and solidarity economy and can therefore generate new synergies and re-elaborations.

The commons, as forms and modes of self-organization, can coexist with, resist or contest neoliberal logic. The production of the commons is shaped in diverse contexts through the defence, recovery or re-appropriation of goods -material and/or symbolic-. There is a great heterogeneity of the commons today, both in cities and in rural areas, which can be created from tangible human needs (housing, food, work, etc.) and/or environmental needs (defence of goods such as water, soil, seeds and territories as a whole), as well as from intangible needs (creation of free software, cooperative digital platforms, knowledge, cultural creations, among others).

Rethinking the SSE in the face of the multiple processes of dispossession that are affecting territories, makes visible new community and solidarity meanings on which alliances can be built. These meanings are not limited to institutionalized forms of cooperation such as cooperatives, organizations and formalized networks, but also include strongly territorialized communities -such as indigenous communities- and even virtual communities -as in the case of free software and different digital platforms-.

The SSE has been developed and institutionalized as an alternative socioeconomic form to both the market economy and the public economy. In this sense, as proposed by Ostrom, it has historically demonstrated that there are collective capacities that, through self-organization, can manage different projects in common without leading to overexploitation or misuse of resources. The entities traditionally recognized within the SSE sector that have managed to produce, distribute and consume in an associative way, generally became institutionalized as alternatives in contexts where the economy is based on the market. Thus, mutual aid practices, in many cases, are consolidating and

adopting classic formats within the SSE, such as cooperatives, which are recognized - by Ostrom and several others - as empirical institutions of self-organization.

In the face of theories that explain the economy solely through rational, competitive and utilitarian individuals acting within the framework of self-regulated markets, both the experiences of the commons and the SSE share some common aspects:

1. They focus on a relational economy, strongly supported by the concept of care and human interdependence and interdependence with nature.
2. They highlight the inadequacy of the public/private dichotomy.

In this sense, the dialogue between entities that make up the SSE and experiences of the commons can revitalize practices and theories on social transformation as follows.

1. It highlights the importance of the relational and community component, within the economy in particular, and the reproduction of life in general.
2. It provides singular experiences of combining economic and social objectives explicitly in the same project. The SSE - such as the development of almost two centuries of the cooperative movement - provides concrete examples of producing the commons that are based on associativism and self-government.
3. It points out new connections and openings to multidimensional relational compositions and multiscale alliances between the SSE and the commons based on the capital-life tension.
4. It breaks down some productivist biases that make invisible some essential work for reproduction, broadening the conceptions of wage work to the integral work that allows sustaining life (paid and unpaid).
5. It highlights new dimensions such as care among humans and care about the environment.
6. It elaborates on the principle of democracy and self-management.

It can be concluded that the discourse on the antagonistic nature of the common can become a renewed impetus for politicization within the different forms of the SSE. It helps revitalize visions of cooperation and strengthen the SSE's potential in the context of neoliberalism.

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