

Introduction: Beyond Hardin and Ostrom: New Heterodox Research on the Commons

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This special issue of the *Review of Radical Political Economics* originated from concerns about the environmental degradation and inequality that accompany the capitalist project, which—aided by neoliberal policies—has enclosed and privatized common spaces and resources. Ideological support for privatization has been typically argued using elements of Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons” (1968) approach, despite the fact that in his article and with later clarifications he made clear that the tragedy lies in the *non-regulated* commons. Alternative ways of regulating and managing the commons and their concomitant outcomes on equality have been explored by Elinor Ostrom. The call for papers for this special issue invited heterodox inquiry in whether expanded use of commons, broadly defined, can resist the onslaught of privatization and accelerating degradation of the earth and its resources; how alternative ways of managing the commons can address inequality by race, class, and gender; and how the commons intertwines with the broader issue of environmental sustainability.

The call for contributions yielded articles by academic scholars and research scientists that covered the specific areas queried, broadening the discussion of heterodox inquiry of property in the commons to complications arising with commodified aspects of the commons; to socialized aspects of governing the commons; to knowledge, intellectual property, and the public domain; and to the competition for attention space in people’s minds by advertising. The last of these issues heightens our concern that culture and the collective memory are at risk of becoming increasingly consistent with the mold of capitalism and neoliberalism.

In the first article in this special issue, Franklin Obeng-Odoom discusses historical political economy debates surrounding property in what has traditionally been considered to constitute the commons. While such debates currently tend to take Hardin’s 1968 paper as a starting point, their origin has been traced to the third century in Richard Schlatter’s work *Private Property: A History of an Idea* (1951). The debates distinguish between the natural rights school, which argues that private property is natural, a view that was reformulated in Hardin’s paper, and the conventional school, also called the “socialist group” by Schlatter. In the 21st century, and especially in the Global South, the commons have been approached via the natural rights school theory in the context of neoliberal policies sometimes imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. Obeng-Odoom points to longitudinal and comparative studies that provide evidence that indicates common property in land is feasible, even though historically it has nevertheless become privatized.

Giles Austen, Sarah Jennings, and Jeffrey Dambacher consider the issues associated with commons in the category of *res nullius* open-access resources, specifically the open access of the world’s oceans by the fishing industry. Fish is both a biological factor of production and a commodity for its human predators. When the problem of open access is addressed by means of oceanic enclosures—as has happened in the early 1980s at the end of the so-called Icelandic cod wars with the creation of exclusive economic zones extending 200 miles off shore—then fish is simply turned into a marketable commodity and its biological and ecosystem role is no longer valued, so that extinction becomes a real possibility. The authors point out that the traditional mathematized capital-theoretic model cannot distinguish a policy choice between weak and strong sustainability, while an alternative qualitative model that frames the analysis as a dialectic

process can demonstrate tradeoffs involved in such a policy choice. In relation to the wider issue of water, Jeremy Schmidt and Kyle Mitchell (2014) argued that there is not a single commons framework to analyze water as a commons, and develop alternative variants of the commons, and that competition is not antagonistic but rather agonistic, taking place among adversaries and not enemies.¹

The next two articles in the collection continue the exploration of difficulties associated with the need to rethink the meaning of factors of production, and their “communing” in relation to concerns of sustainability. Molly Scott Cato and Peter North discuss the need to re-interpret the meaning of the three classic factors of production, referred to as “fictitious commodities” by Karl Polanyi in his *Great Transformation* (1944), if we hope to go in the direction of more sustainable and equitable economies. There are quite a few examples in Europe and Latin America of processes of “working in common,” or social and solidarity economy practices that place human needs and sustainability concerns above profit. As would be expected, their discussion concludes that sustainability does indeed require a commons-based economy. Addressing a special case of social and solidarity practices, Daniel Newman considers the potential of communal usages of the automobile—in particular the sustainable transport offered by the electric car—as a way to counter marginalization of the working class. Examples of communal usage models include *Autolib* in Paris, an arrangement similar to self-service bikes, and *Talybont Energy* in the Brecons Beacons National Park in Wales, which has run a zero-carbon car share operation since 2012.

Communal usage of resources organized in a post-capitalist world forms the subject of three articles in this volume. Danijela Dolenc and Mislav Žitko explore communing of resources in the context of socialist governance, using the work of Branco Horvat and the Foucauldian concept of governmentality² to rationalize that socialist governing principles can create societies that are radically democratic, egalitarian, and capable of addressing sustainability concerns of the 21st century. Christopher Gunn provides lessons for a post-capitalist form of governance by researching the pre-capitalist organizations of *acequias*, a form of commons that has existed in the southwestern United States for centuries and is used to share surface water for agriculture by means of canals or irrigation ditches, under specific use limitation rules. The predecessors of the *acequias* were cited by Elinor Ostrom, and her eight keys to a successful commons—including a system developed and carried out by community members to monitor members’ behavior—fit the *acequia* practice remarkably well.

Johannes Euler also focuses on the possibilities of a post-capitalist society that goes beyond both the market and the state. To this end, he enriches the conceptualization of the commons as a logical and enabling form and a foundation for a needs-oriented rather than profit-oriented socialist society. The social dimension of the commons is well illustrated by the so-called digital commons, examples of which are Wikipedia and open-source software such as Firefox. While such programs can be improved by users, a so-called “copyleft” license ensures that they remain freely accessible. Thus, a new mode of production is developed, which is simultaneously a pure form of consumption, and the free software movement has therefore become an intriguing topic in the commons discourse.

When viewed as a productive resource that is improved bit by bit, software development can also be likened to the agglomeration of what is traditionally referred to as technology. The communal aspects of technology, in particular the tool combination process, are addressed in William

¹Schmidt and Mitchell’s paper was submitted for publication in the early planning stages of this special issue, and thus can be viewed as a companion piece that fits with the other articles included herein.

²This term is sometimes written in its hyphenated form, govern-mentality. Governmentality refers to the dimensions of the art of governing. While it includes the mentalities and rationales underlying policies to govern subjects, it may also refer to the ways in which governments produce the kind of citizens that are best suited to fulfill its policies (Foucault 2008).

Dugger's article. Technological advance through tool combination is a cumulative process that has taken place over thousands of years and innumerable generations. Tool combination is a communal process, and the communal characteristics of technology have not been included in articles on the tragedy of the commons. Dugger points out that technology never suffers such tragedy because when used freely the accumulated technology does not diminish. To the contrary, it increases geometrically. Proprietary institutionalization of technology then should be resisted, and technology should be regarded and maintained as a special kind of Ostrom's commons or common-pool resource.

From open-source software and technology, the discourse naturally expands to the public domain in general. This expansion is provided by Antoine Dolcerocca and Benjamin Coriat. They explain how the commons has been seen in relation to the public domain in the literature. The term "public domain" is a relatively new one, generally used in relation to issues of intellectual property, and designates works that do not have copyright protection. The public domain is thus a particular kind of commons that contains resources that may span a state, country, or even the world as a whole. A broad definition of the public domain would not merely include works free of intellectual property rights, but also those that are only partially covered by such rights. Dolcerocca and Coriat point to the usefulness of concepts such as the commons in the context of intellectual property and the public domain to broaden and indeed revolutionize understandings of property, property relations, and equitable distribution of resources.

The final three articles in this issue address the knowledge and culture commons. Alfredo Macías Vázquez and Pablo Alonso González extend the view of the commons beyond software and technology to human knowledge, and they explore ways in which economic models can be based on the knowledge commons and used to open new socioeconomic scenarios in the face of neoliberalism and its relentless attacks on the commons. Much as Dugger's description of the communal process of tool combination and the growing intergenerational gifts it provides, production of common knowledge may give rise to "enlarged and more sustainable reproduction of the human forces and their wellbeing." Again, it is important to find new strategies that counteract the neoliberal attack on the commons and do not create artificial scarcities and generation of value merely for the elites of society. Yi Zhou points out that, while the anticommens in physical things is not always tragic, the anticommens in knowledge is. The tragedy can only be overcome by the creation, expansion, and protection of the knowledge commons. Zhou constructs a simple model that demonstrates the working of a "comedy of the commons," supporting the momentum of the worldwide social movement for free knowledge, and in the case of China dissenting from an evolving consensus that favors increased restrictions in relation to intellectual property.

Ultimately, the article by Zoe Sherman goes beyond the consideration of knowledge to culture as a kind of common. Culture includes a people's music, literature, ideas, and beliefs. Sherman points out that a culture is not merely composed of information, but also of attention. Attention is yet another aspect of the commons that can be appropriated by capitalism. There is competition for cultural space and, by extension, the collective memory, and both can be eroded or rerouted to foster capitalist goals. Sherman's article thus has implications for postmodern and critical discourses related to cultural capital. To the extent that capitalism competes for cultural space, there is the possibility that knowledge accumulation and culture increasingly become geared to its agenda, and that intellectuals increasingly become the intellect workers that Paul Baran (1961) wrote about more than fifty years ago.

While the articles in this special issue have abundantly and fruitfully addressed the queries raised in the call for papers, they also have broadened the concept of the commons and have advanced analyses that support continued resistance against its privatization. Several areas remain to be further explored, including issues of governance and power, *e.g.* in relation to who gets to decide what is knowledge, what is culture, who gets to make decisions on governing

boards, and more. Not surprisingly, then, the agenda for research on the commons is not yet exhausted.

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