



The commons and their im/possibilities

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In recent years a familiar mantra has been recited through media channels, government reports and related sources, namely that of austerity. By now, the images of protest movements of various stripes have been well-documented, which has given the Left a renewed notion of opposition and resistance to a seemingly unperturbed neoliberal encroachment on almost all areas of life (e.g. Bonefeld, 2012, this issue; also Hamann, 2009; Read, 2009).

Consequences of the neoliberal transformation of society range from governmental policy-making along the lines of private corporate and industry interests, to the privatisation of public goods and public institutions – amongst others, hospitals, prisons, universities, schools and cultural organizations – to the self-responsibilisation of individuals for their employment, careers, welfare and health. Within neoliberal governmentality many areas and aspects that were once understood as social and political are thus repositioned within the domain of individual and collective self-government and self-management (Hamann, 2009: 40; Lodrup-Hjorth et al., 2011). Yet, this re-positioning is generally presented as an increase in autonomies and choices of individuals and groups of individuals (Vandenberghe, 2008).

However, as public services and properties in western countries become increasingly privatised, or disappear all together, the pendulum of public attention has firmly swung towards the social relations within society that appear to withstand the calculus of neoliberal transaction. For ideologies of neoliberalism, such areas of society provide a convenient support for a shrinking of the state. This can be seen for example in the notion of the Big Society, in the way that it functions as an ideological totem in David Cameron's conservative coalition government. Here, the charitable becomes an ersatz policy of public service provision, albeit one that functions without state funding and operates merely on philanthropy and a 'spirit of voluntarism' (e.g. Caffentzis, 2010). Aspects of society such as the arts, education, health care or nursing, which do not primarily operate on exchange value and can, thus, not clearly prove value and usefulness become a justification for a state withdrawal of services and support (also Böhm and Land, 2009). Within the cracks, private operators scramble to commodify and individualise what was previously a state affair.

Yet we should be careful to view such developments merely in the light of curbing public spending. Contemporary Marxist and post-Marxist work on the Left (e.g. Adler, 2007; De Angelis, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2009; Virno, 2004) has long theorised that capital sustains itself by gradually encroaching on the networks of non-transactional value that are cultivated within shared social settings. For this, Marxists have developed the notion of the, anti-capitalist, ‘commons’ (Caffentzis, 2010: 23f.). These commons provide spaces in which labour and its organization take place in greater mutuality and solidarity than that afforded by capitalist conditions of production, and common goods are produced here whose value is not parasitically creamed off through ordinary mechanisms of exchange, valorisation and surplus value extraction (Hardt and Negri, 2009).

Capital, however, relies on enclosure of both pre-capitalist and new commons and the social goods that are produced in them for its own accumulative drive (De Angelis, 2007: 133ff.). For this reason, commons are not merely social spaces in which work and life might unfold in richer, more autonomous and sustainable ways beyond the scope of capital; the commons are also sites in which critique and resistance have the potential to develop (Caffentzis, 2010: 36). These forms of resistance rely on the social relations, bonds and engagements that sustain social and political practices that are not (yet) readily subsumed under a neoliberal order of investment and competition, and the normalising and disciplining effects of the markets (De Angelis, 2007: 85; also Foucault, 1982, 2008). Within the commons, continuous movements are constructed and organized that can run counter to the attempts to instrumentalise, commodify and capitalise on social invention, integration, mutuality and creative and cooperative forms of labour. However, as the commons are currently used in various ways, we ‘can never guarantee a good outcome’ (Deleuze, 1995: 32). We can never know in advance if the struggles of the commons’ movements create cracks in the capitalistic accumulation process, are stifled by it or even used in the name and interests of recent, philanthropy- and collaboration-oriented, capitalism (Caffentzis, 2010: 40). Much work is therefore needed to create an affirmative politics and embodied ethical practices of (re)constructing the commons and common wealth and, in this vein, more actual participation, democracy, equality – and justice (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 300ff.; Hardt and Negri, 2009).

In this open issue, composed of three papers, three notes and three book reviews, we see the contours to what kind of discussion such an affirmative politics might entail in diverse areas, such as the Open Software Movement, Open Education Movement, Housing Policies, Critical Management Scholarship, Art Education as well as in debates on events and their relationship to democracy, social capital and immaterial labour. Above all, the contributions of this issue address specific concerns and tensions around capitalist exploitation and commodification logics *and* community-oriented practices of organizing that go beyond strategic calculation and exchange. In all these contributions a question that arises and seems to need constant attention is how capital moves to absorb and enclose the commons and their qualities, or to put it in slightly different terms, how the commons evolve in relation to certain contradictions within their own status as non-capital.

The first paper in this issue ‘From open source to open government: A critique of open politics’ by Nathaniel Tkacz focuses on the open source and free software movements. According to Tkacz, these movements emerged to oppose the private proprietary system of software code encryption in order to make users more dependable on repeat purchases and support, force brand loyalty through compatibility requirements and so on. Unified by a conviction that source code should be visible and openly accessible, the open source movement works on the basis of organically emerging principles of collaboration and access, in ‘bazaar’-like fashion. As such, both the free software movement and the open source movement can be seen as involved in the building of a commons that opposes the capitalist exploitation of intellectual property rights, through the commodification of the fruits of software developers’ labour. Here, as elsewhere, the labour of those who develop code is dependent not just on social bonds that are established within given companies that employ them, but in a much wider community of those interested and engaged in the sharing of ideas and knowledge, involved in mutual endeavours, educating peers and so on. Key figures in the open source movement have proclaimed the movement as politically neutral and merely founded upon universal principles of openness. Tkacz argues that this rhetoric of openness is indebted to a Popperian notion of the open society, which is ultimately only ever negatively defined, i.e. without positive ontological content but in opposition to notions of totalitarianism. For the open source movement, this means that its guiding ethos is defined in opposition to techno-legal forms of ‘closure’, which come in the shape of attempts at creating proprietary code and restrictions on information sharing by various companies and institutions. This lack of positive content then demonstrates the ways in which the common itself is contingent upon capital in its production and reproduction. Tkacz signals that the notion of the ‘open’ in guiding the formation of commons therefore has substantial limitations, as it distracts from core issues and obfuscates the modes in which enclosure of commons and co-optation of its imagery (such as in right-wing ideology) is already taking place.

We also see this concern about contradictions in the notion of the ‘open’ reflected in Neary's and Winn's paper ‘Opening education beyond the property relation’. While the authors acknowledge the participatory potentials of Open Education (OE) and Open Education Resources (OER) in principle, they question the realisation of OE(R)'s proclaimed intentions of going beyond traditional property relations and power structures. According to Neary and Winn, technologies such as Creative commons licensing, defining and communicating how to use intellectual property illustrate that OE(R) does not provide universal open access to education and knowledge and does therefore not fully undermine the privatisation of public education. Moreover, the authors problematise the social relations and the work and production processes characterizing OE. In their view, these processes are still infused by the logics of capitalist production, and are subsequently less oriented on autonomy, participation and democratic ideals than often assumed. Neary and Winn argue that especially within the rapidly commercialising realm of academia, the OE movement has not contributed to a liberation of constraints associated with the labour process. On the contrary, they see an increase in the commodification and standardisation of intellectual work and education through OE(R). However, in order to harness the

revolutionary and progressive potential of OE, it would be necessary to evaluate the broader material conditions in which immaterial work, the workforce and knowledge are produced. According to Neary and Winn, re-focusing on the social processes of production and labour (where value and power find their origins) would enable the OE movement to develop as real commons or ‘commonism’. This latter terms represents a form of the commons that would no longer sustain capitalist modes of production but rather form a collective political project that subverts commercialisation, commodification and alienation and, in this vein, the individualising power relations structuring our ‘virtualised’, post-industrial society.

These issues are also highlighted with respect to the public good of housing in Hodkinson. In his paper ‘The return of the housing question’, Hodkinson presents an overview of the UK housing situation within the contemporary neoliberal economy, including the ways in which debates around the defence of public housing and encroaching individualisation and privatisation have polarised activists and policy makers on the Left. On one hand, the legal possibilities of privatisation of council housing have been viewed as an opportunity to regain autonomy and self-organization by those communities who would otherwise be increasingly dependent on the state for the provision of a shrinking stock of public housing. However, this has been strongly critiqued by orthodox Marxists who view state provision of housing as the most pragmatic response to rising rents and inaccessible market prices associated with privatisation, in the absence of a wider transformation of capitalist relations. In responding to these debates, Hodkinson, like Tkacz and Neary and Winn, approaches the question of the public good from the perspective of contemporary Marxist theory on the commons. This allows for a reconsideration of the productivity of social contexts in themselves, and capitalism’s reliance on a reproduction of labour power within such social relations through the thematic of commons and their enclosure by capital. Hodkinson suggests that a progressive response to the question of housing involves three modes of mobilising the common against its capitalist enclosure: prefigurative, strategic and hegemonic commoning. Prefigurative commoning represents a way of thinking about sociality in terms that are distinctly non-capitalist in nature, and thereby constitutes a way to become aware of the oppositional relation between commons and capitalist enclosure. Here, social, material and aesthetic aspects of living become a focus for building communities with a shared, embodied relationship to their place of dwelling. This common becomes the basis for solving the immediate needs within residential communities, mutual aid and a basis for shared action against immediate threats to its stability and safety. Strategic commoning builds upon this prefigurative basis, by mobilising relations of solidarity and autonomy into tactics to prevent further enclosure by capital of housing in the form of ‘privatisation, demolition, repossession, eviction, commodification or displacement’. Hegemonic commoning, finally, points to the emergence of a political subjectivity based on struggles around housing, in the form of housing co-operatives and organized resistance against redevelopment and compulsory state purchases of council estates and other forms of community housing. Hodkinson concludes by outlining a set of demands that could guide such a radical housing politics.

In his note 'From humanity to nationality to bestiality: A polemic on alternatives without conclusion' Werner Bonefeld discusses the politics of (anti)austerity accompanying the financial and economic crisis. Like Hodkinson, he thereby mainly reveals the positions that the political Left has recently taken up. Following Bonefeld's evaluation, the Left either pursues a politics of anti-austerity, asking for a restructuring of the capitalist economy to benefit workers' interests, or promotes a 'socialist alternative' to austerity, which routinely comprises suggested institutional transformations that re-nationalise and democratise parts of the financial sector. Bonefeld notes that these policies are 'captured' within the logic of capital and (anti)austerity, since they privilege a discourse of cuts in public policy. As a consequence, current leftist policies tend to sustain the basic assumptions, orders, classifications and relations that comprise market-oriented capitalism. However, the crucial question to pose seems to be the following: what does it mean to live a life as an economic resource? Here, Bonefeld asks for 'radical opposition' to specific aspects of the capitalist system. This would require as a first step saying 'no' to prevalent production modes within the realms of life and work. Furthermore, it would require re-politicising labour relations in the *social* sphere and, thus, critically engaging with these relations beyond the sphere and logic of capital and the economy.

The question Matt Rodda poses in his note 'Protest without return; or, pedagogy with a gag' is how art educators and teachers can practice critique and protest under institutional conditions that increasingly demand demonstrating value, efficiency and usefulness. While Rodda acknowledges a variety of political and economic dependencies artists and art educators are currently opposed to, he also states that effective critique and protest can emerge from art education. In this regard, Rodda introduces the example of the 'alternative education road tour' symposium to illustrate what 'protest pedagogy' in the arts could look like. Theoretically, the note takes its inspiration from Giorgio Agamben and his concepts of 'gesture' and the 'gag', which for Rodda exemplify how recent output-focused performance demands can be undermined within art education. Both the gesture and the gag are characterized by a status of 'in-betweenness' – they are or have neither an 'end without means' nor do they present a 'means to an end'. Above all, the gesture and the gag operate on an aesthetic plane, which sustains their ambiguous, ephemeral and event-related nature. According to Rodda, it is also this nature that enables them to engage in protest in the context of art education, without running the risk of being captured and commodified by neoliberal measurement and valorisation programmes currently governing the arts.

Finally, Fournier and Smith's note 'Making choice, taking risk: On the coming out of critical management studies' considers how critique has taken shape within academia and critical management studies specifically. Fournier and Smith challenge the way in which public critiques of management often come from senior academics in business schools. For the authors, such critiques are constructed within a site that itself embodies and indeed embraces many of the management practices that are the object of critique, such as highly hierarchical systems, labour intensification, precarious working arrangements and other features of contemporary labour management. The authors consider whether such a contradiction can be held responsible for the general failure of critical management critique

to connect with wider political struggles, social movements and alternative forms of organization. In doing so, they question whether radical projects pursued from the confines of the contemporary university are possibly too isolated from the commons in which social movements and radical politics emerge, hobbling efforts to connect with such progressive struggles for reform of work and management practice. Inter alia, Fournier and Smith suggest that the incentives and rewards within business schools may have been so successful in channelling the research activities of staff towards high-ranking journal publications, that critique has become disembodied from wider struggles. This note therefore reflects on the question of whether critical management scholarship is losing its meaningfulness.

We conclude this issue on the im/possibilities of the commons with three book reviews that all revolve around the topic of contemporary capitalism and its state of health. In the first review, Charles Barthold discusses Bruno Bosteels' *Badiou and Politics*. According to Barthold, this book is not only an attempt to give a coherent interpretation of Badiou's political theory, it is also a critique of two of the most well known interpretations of Badiou's political philosophy, namely Peter Hallward's and Slavoj Žižek's interpretations. With respect to the role of the commons within contemporary capitalism, one of the interesting aspects Barthold points out about Bosteels' reading is that Badiou's politics are a critique of left-wing communist political positions such as Hardt and Negri (2000).

In the second review of this issue, Emma Dowling discusses Ben Fine's *Theories of Social Capital: Researchers Behaving Badly*. Here, the concept of social capital emerges as principally relevant for understanding the commons. While the concept of social capital, referring to the importance of social relations within contemporary capitalism, often carries positive connotations, Fine's evaluation seems to be more critical. Rather than suggesting that the notion of social capital offers a critique of capitalistic relations, he assesses it as a means to maintain its status quo. In Dowling's view, Fine offers a sharp critique of the 'depoliticising nature of social capital'. However, she also suggests that for future studies it might be helpful to look at another concept that seems to simmer beneath Fine's critique - namely labour.

This issue closes with Steen Nepper Larsen's review of a book that debates exactly that topic within contemporary cognitive capitalism - André Gorz's *The Immaterial*. Here, capitalism is destined to die. According to Larsen, Gorz argues that human knowledge has become the most important productive force and an economic resource second to none for the valorisation of capital. But as knowledge is not a limited resource, reducible to a price or the time invested in its 'production', the possibility of a 'communism' of free knowledge and thinking is beginning to be envisioned within the contemporary corporate world. However, Larsen reminds us that capitalism is alive and 'kicking'. In his view, contemporary capitalism has an immense ability 'to integrate major parts of human creativity, our innovative skills, desires and communicative utterances to foster and maintain its own logic of accumulation'. What Larsen goes on to argue here is that the

commons might hold a possibility for going beyond capitalism but their existence is not a sign of the demise of capitalism.

Taken together, the contributions of this issue address the question of the ‘possibility of the commons’ in different societal areas, with reference to different, mainly neo-Marxist, theoretical concepts and with different degrees of optimism and pessimism. Yet a common evaluation the contributions follow is that the de-limiting nature of market-oriented capitalism makes it impossible to completely escape its order and power. Simultaneously, it is argued that the contemporary form or ‘spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) is, despite *and* due to its dynamics, hybridity and ‘co-operative’ nature, not able to fully capture, absorb and enclose the commons (Caffentzis, 2010: 40f.). The papers hence illustrate that the commons, and their social and creative dimension, cannot be reduced to commodities and, thus, economic and capitalist logics and rationalities (De Angelis, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2009).

According to Donzelot and Gordon (2008: 60) ‘no governmentality will abolish resistance to government’. Following this line, it seems that, while neoliberalism becomes limitless and ‘capital goes transnational’ (Vandenberghe, 2008: 897), resistance is somehow globalising as well. Recent protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street or EuroMayDay promote and support this assumption. Also within the era of neoliberalism, there seems to be ‘something that flees the system, something that is not controllable’ (Vandenberghe, 2008: 878). The commons can be seen as exemplars representing this ‘some-thing’. As ‘other spaces’ and contingent sites of resistance, they can create and enable the formation of collective movements and escape lines which have the potential and vitality to continuously or temporarily undermine, question and transgress dominant governmental rationalities, ideologies and politics of truth (Foucault, 1982). However, in order to be able to use these potentials it has recently been argued that the Left whose theory ‘sometimes seems to have got stuck in a rut’ (Thrift, 2011: ix), needs an injection of what Sloterdijk calls ‘hyperbolic theory’. This is theory that does not move within the normal dualism of western thought and which dares to think the impossible as a possibility. Contemporary capitalism and the commons are today in the middle of a battle for the imagination and, as Thrift (2011: ix) argues, if the Left is not able to forge new concepts and ideas, it risks losing this battle. It risks making the possibility of the commons an impossibility. The contributions of this issue, we believe, keep the struggle for the imagination of forms of ‘social life beyond the coordination of capital’ (Caffentzis, 2010: 41) alive.

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