



Commonism and capabilities

Diego Lanzi

abstract

The paper discusses how to address commons management and preservation issues without relying on market institutions. In doing so, we adopt a Marxian viewpoint and endorse a contemporary political theory known as *commonism*. Firstly, we explain why commons are not commodities and introduce commonism's main pillars. Secondly, we outline the main influences of Marx's thought on Amartya Sen's *capability approach* and discuss why Sen's theory can be useful for refining some theoretical aspects of commonism.

Introduction

In recent times, there has been a growing debate on common-pool resources, *the commons*, and on the design of institutions aimed at governing and managing them. Well-known examples of commons are: groundwater basins, forests, ocean fisheries, clean air, mainframe computers, software code, planetary climate control, international political institutions and settlements, immaterial collective infrastructures and the Internet; the kind of unitary resource individuals derive from commons can vary from air and water to information bits or budget allocations (Blomqvist and Ostrom, 1985).

Among the motivations for such an increasing interest is the attempt to solve a classic problem of commons provision and use: the Hardin *tragedy* (Hardin, 1968). Like in Prisoner's Dilemma game situations, collectively-optimal

individual decisions about the use of commons contrast with individual rationality dictates. Individual optimal choices are socially-harmful and lead to over-usage and impoverishment of common-pool resources¹.

Since individuals are trapped in dilemma-like settings, public authorities have to introduce institutions for solving management problems. These institutions can include top-down, governmental regulation, private property and markets, or everything in between. For sure, Ostrom's seminal works clearly point out that, given the distinctive features of commons, self-organized, bottom-up governance systems are largely superior to other institutional solutions².

Market sceptics like Dyer-Witheford (2007: 1), thereby, point out that:

ecological disaster is the revenge of the markets so-called negative externalities; social development is based on market operations, 'intensifying inequality, with immiseration amidst plenitude'; and networks are, the market's inability to accommodate its own positive externalities, that is, to allow the full benefits of innovations when they overflow market price mechanisms.

These market failures in managing and preserving commons can be explained, *inter alia*, by using some concepts of Karl Marx's political economy. More precisely, Marx's definition of what commodities are, and his notion of circuit of capital. As we shall see, commons are not commodities, and the circuit of capital cannot operate properly in managing and governing them.

In what follows, therefore, we approach commons management and preservation issues without using ideas of market, marginal returns and relative prices. Conversely, we adopt a Marxian viewpoint and endorse a contemporary political theory known as *commonism*. The reason is twofold: on the one hand, commonism's perspective is consistent with the principle of self-governance of common-pool resources strongly defended by Ostrom and others scholars; on the other hand, commonism requires that collectivities, groups and associations have the capacity of affect and direct social change

¹ For a seminal discussion on common-pool resources and game theory see Dasgupta (1982).

² See, among others, Ostrom (1990) and (2000).

(Fournier, 2013) and here, again, the term capacity reminds some classic Marxian ideas recombined by Amartya Sen to create his *Capability Approach*³. Our main aim, therefore, is to intersect elements of the above mentioned theories (e.g. Ostrom's institutional theory, commonism and the Capability Approach) in order to suggest a starting point for public discussion about how to deal with commons in a post-capitalist social order.

The organization of the essay is the following. In the next Section, we discuss why commons are not commodities and introduce commonism's main pillars. Some conditions for commonism to be a possible alternative to capitalism, as a mode of social organization, are emphasized as well. Secondly, in Section 3, we briefly out-sketch main influences of Marx's thought on Amartya Sen's *Capability Approach*, and why Sen's theory can be useful for refining some theoretical aspects of commonism. Then, in Section 4, in order to define some capabilities for commons, we intertwine Ostrom's design principles for self-governance institutions with capabilitarianism. Last but not least, the concluding section discusses how the common has been articulated as an alternative to capitalism in the scholarly literature.

Commodities and commons

Scholars' proposals for managing commons beyond market-based systems can be viewed in the context of conceptualizing alternatives to capitalism. In this debate, Bollier (2015: 1) points out that the common:

is less a noun than a verb because it is primarily about the social practices of commoning; acts of mutual support, conflict, negotiation, communication and experimentation that are needed to create systems to manage shared resources.

As a social process, the common organizes and institutionalizes the political practice of commoning (Hosseini, 2021). Considering social-relational aspects of the common also allows the issue of togetherness and collective governance to be raised (Ostrom, 2015).

³ Original Sen's contributions on the Capability Approach are Sen (1980), (1985) and (1987). For classic surveys on the approach see Roybens (2005) and (2016).

From this post-capitalist perspective, markets and relative price systems' inability to manage common-pool resources can be explained by comparing commons to Marx's notion of *commodity*. As Marx (1977: 243) wrote:

if commodities could speak, they would say this: our use value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value...we relate to each other merely as exchange values.

This statement emphasizes what happens when commodities exchange values (e.g. relative prices) *merely* differ from their total/social values as a result of externalities and/or intrinsic value components that cannot be quantified in terms of price, just as in the case of commons. Following Marx (1981), along the '*circuit of capital*' commodities are exchanged for money, money purchases as commodities labor, materials, machinery etc., and industrial capital produces new commodities by means of commodities. The former are sold for more money in an auto-catalytic, self-reinforcing process.

The cell forms of capitalist accumulation are commodities which must be private goods having only instrumental value and reliable relative prices. If last conditions do not hold, and exchange values do not coincide with social ones, capitalistic profit accumulation through the above circuit generates important social costs for populations, collectives and communities.

Given that commons are not commodities, from a radical political economy standpoint, some scholars have not only stressed that markets and relative price systems will never offer proper solutions to common-pool resource governance issues, but that, in order to properly manage the common, the whole capitalistic system has to be subverted. For example, Dyer-Witheford (2006, 2007) and de Pauter and Dyer-Witheford (2010) suggest the intriguing idea of *commonism*. As Dyer-Witheford (2007: 2) points out:

if the cell form of capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of a society beyond capital is the common. A commodity is a good produced for sale, a common is a good produced, or conserved, to be shared. The notion of a commodity, a good produced for sale, presupposes private owners between whom the exchange occurs. The notions of the common presupposes collectivities – associations and assemblies – within which sharing is organized. If capitalism presents itself as an immense heap of commodities, commonism is a multiplication of commons.

Accordingly to commonism, three different levels of common resources characterize the so-called '*circuit of the common*': (i) *ecological commons*, i.e., global public goods, or global ecosystem services, which determine the ecology of the planet and of all species living on it (among the others: the biosphere, planetary climate control, fishery reserves, watersheds and freshwater basins, epidemiological care provision or the regulation of the food supply); (ii) *networked digital commons*, i.e., non-rival, common pool, digital technologies that overflow intellectual property regimes (like, for instance, creative commons, open-source systems or peer-to-peer networks); and (iii) *social commons*, i.e., commons for socially-sustainable productive and reproductive work (for example: re-distributive social institutions granting equal opportunities, collectively-managed forms of production like cooperatives, or universal basic income programs).⁴

Now, the Marxist circuit works differently for commons: collectivities use shared resources for productive and reproductive activities which create more commons, and these new commons give rise to new forms of possible peer-to-peer, bottom-up associations. This process builds '*the circuit of the common*'. Alternative provision networks, or groups, are created as a result of interactions between the above levels of the common in a way that is both 'aggressive and expansive: proliferating, self-strengthening and diversifying' (Dyer-Witthford, 2007).⁵

As a result of social experiments created in resistance to capitalism, the circuit of the common will emerge (de Pauter and Dyer-Witthford, 2010) *only if* human beings and populations have 'the capacity to affect change in their collective development' (Dyer-Witthford, 2006). Such a capacity is defined as 'a *constitutive power*, a bootstrapped, self-reinforcing loop of social co-operation, techno-scientific competencies and conscious awareness' (*ibid.*) that makes possible for members of collectivities to invent new modes of

⁴ For a discussion on the new commonwealth of commons see Neary and Winn (2012).

⁵ Gibson-Graham calls this process the circuit of 'generative commons'. See Gibson-Graham (2006).

production and reproduction outside the orbit of commodities. Thus, following Marx and Engels (1970: 92), commonism requires that individuals:

appropriate the existing totality of productive forces and the appropriation of these forces is itself nothing more than the development of individual capacities corresponding to material instruments of production. The appropriation of a totality of instruments of production is, for this reason, the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves.

In order for commonism to achieve its aim of replacing commodity-based capitalism, the importance of *capabilities for commons* is evident and self-sustaining. But what are these capabilities for commons, and how can they be developed and organized? Are they individual or collective capabilities, or both? And again, could these capabilities be developed to enable collectives to self-govern the common?

Unfortunately, neither analytical Marxism nor radical Marxism offer to commonism's thinkers conceptual categories, and tools, to deal with capacity development, something on which Sen's Capability Approach has a lot to say. Hence, in what follows, in order to address above issues, we shall use Sen's approach to define what capabilities for commons are, and how they can be developed consistently with Ostrom's principles for self-governing the common (Ostrom, 2015). These principles depict individual and collective capabilities that are necessary to manage the circuit of the common.

On Marx, Sen and commonism

Throughout his long career, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has worked on poverty, inequality, social justice, and human development issues. Economic inequality and its consequences, as well as the lack of freedom that undermines human flourishing, have been the focus of his research. Sen himself has publicly acknowledged his debt to Marx's ideas, notably:

for teaching us that the most terrible inequalities may be hidden behind an illusion of normality and justice. (Sen, 2006: 81)

Therefore, it is not surprising that many of his contributions to economics, social sciences or development studies have different roots in classic Marxian works⁶.

Firstly, it is true that Marx did not use the term capabilities, and did not interpret individual capacities as freedoms, but he was a strong believer that human flourishing needs capacity development and freedom, exactly what Sen suggests. Sen himself quotes, as a basic reference, Marx at the very beginning of his seminal book, 'Commodities and capabilities' (1985). Both Sen and Marx place human well-being at the core of their reasonings, and interpret human empowerment as the main force of liberation against inequality, poverty and under-development.

Secondly, Marx and Sen have repeatedly emphasized that commodities accumulation must not be the pillar of economic and social development. They have widely argued against 'commodity fetishism' and stressed that some value elements cannot be *commodified* like, for example, human dignity and freedom, or the right to creatively organize productive and re-productive activities.

Finally, Marx and Sen are two important thinkers of the egalitarian tradition of social and political thought. They have largely discussed existing tensions between economic incentives and social justice, and emphasized market institutions' inabilities to solve them.⁷

Nevertheless, Sen believes that public action can correct social inequalities and eliminate deprivations of capabilities. He did not advocate transcending capitalism and market institutions for achieving social justice, as Marx did, and he did not invoke social struggles for ending domination, exploitation, and capitalism. For this reason, Sen has in mind a 'diluted Marx' (Fraser, 2016): the politically-correct social thinker appropriated by the analytical Marxism tradition.⁸

⁶ On Marx and Sen see Qizilbash (2016).

⁷ On this point see Papaioannou (2016) and Fraser (2016).

⁸ See Roemer (1989).

In a radical perspective, more drastic measures are required to combat capitalism's injustices and failures than those admitted by Sen and others. This does not mean, however, that Sen's Capability Approach cannot offer interesting conceptual tools and categories for investigating which capabilities collectivities, communities and groups need to organize the circuit of the common. According to commonism, for instance, Marx's thought suggests to value commodities in terms of their immaterial value for abstract labor, i.e., the production of ideas. Such an assessment, *inter alia*, requires that individuals can control means of intellectual production, can share and feed living, social knowledge, and exercise autonomous institutionality. Indeed, these are collective capabilities. Thereby, a relevant issue for commonism is whether communities, collectivities, groups and the like, have developed capabilities for managing, evolving and preserving commons. Exactly those capacities emphasized in Marx's quote cited in the second Section of this essay (Marx and Engels, 1970: 92).

Furthermore, for self-governing the circuit of the common, social production, open education, collective ownership, self-valorization, shared-knowledge and autonomous institutions are all needed, and Sen's approach can tell us how to identify and assess capabilities for self-governance. For this sake, as we shall argue in the next Section, capabilities development must be designed consistently with Ostrom's principles for long-enduring, self-governance institutions for the common.

Capabilities and commons

For self-governing the circuit of the common, collectivities need, *inter alia*, education, trust, cohesion, full consciousness, complex skills and public reasoning. Hence, from a Capability Approach's perspective, we have to reason in terms of both *individual* and *collective* capabilities.⁹ Furthermore, we

⁹ In what follows, I apply taxonomies for individual and collective capabilities I used in Lanzi (2007) and (2011). See those contributions for details and full references. For a new, comprehensive introduction to the Capability Approach see Chiappero-Martinetti et al. (2020).

need to specify how capabilities for commons can be developed consistently with self-governance principles.

Our discussion in this Section is thus organized as follows: first, a simple taxonomy of capabilities to function is briefly outlined to deal with common resources governance issues; second, some domains for capabilities development are proposed based on Ostrom's work.

Some definitions

In Sen's Capability Approach, the capability set is the set of all feasible functionings vectors an individual can achieve (and choose among) in order to realize his/her well-being. Capabilities are freedoms, or causal powers (Martens, 2006), and they have both individual and collective dimensions.

Furthermore, capabilities are fuzzy entities. They refer, above all, to a person's abilities, concrete skills and knowledge (*S-caps*). Individuals who lack these capabilities face shortfalls in their ability to exploit legal rights, public policies, or external and social conditions to achieve their goals. Moreover, *S-caps* are affected by attained functionings, i.e., doing routine jobs might reduce cognitive skills or learning abilities as well as achieving self-esteem could make effective abilities closer to potential ones.

Indeed, individual opportunities to attain well-being are not simply determined by individual skills or abilities. Public policies, economic entitlements, informal household rules and civic institutions and organizations also shape individual opportunities. Hence, given some *S-caps*, the set of attainable life-paths is heavily influenced by external factors and rules which are often beyond the individual's control (Nussbaum, 2000). These external capabilities (*E-caps*) are shaped by formal rights, or rules, as well as by informal norms of behavior or ascribed social roles, and they may change according to race, gender or social condition. In addition, *E-caps* can be radically influenced by achieved functionings and by *S-caps* because better education and widespread knowledge can lead to cultural changes, or better awareness of (and proactive adaptation to) social norms and inequalities (such as sex discrimination).

Finally, *E-caps* may directly determine *S-caps* if knowledge and skill acquisition are tacit processes based on multilateral information sharing. Taken together, external and innate capabilities describe individual options in terms of functioning achievements (the so-called option capabilities, or *O-caps*). *E-caps* are also social capabilities in both possible meanings of the expression, that are: *collective capabilities*, i.e., capabilities which can only be exploited by individuals as parts of groups, teams or collectivities; and *socially-dependent capabilities*, i.e., capabilities which are embedded in social structures and can only be exploited through social interaction.

Nevertheless, as stressed by Gasper (2002), human freedom is not simply defined by what a person does or could do, but also by how much what he/she does is consistent with what he/she believes is right and worth doing. Individuals define and debate which values and goals are relevant and valuable to them through discussion and dialogue about what capabilities are essential. In order to do this, agents need moral capabilities (*M-caps*) which enable them to interact, to form purposes and identities, to internalize ethical principles and to rate different life-paths. Additionally, *M-caps* are crucial for discussing social modes of production, reproduction, and common resource management, and for generating new kinds of behavior or models of development (*social change*). Finally, without well-nourished *M-caps*, skills could be wrongly oriented, larger option sets could cause confusion and weaknesses of will, and social norms and constraints could be automatically internalized with no criticisms or reactions. Some of these *M-caps* depend on individual traits, beliefs and attitudes; some others are genuinely social. Moreover, Begon (2017) emphasizes that if *M-caps* are taken seriously, capabilities won't just be only the possibility of achieving a particular functioning, but the substantive freedom to do so in any domain we find meaningful (*capabilities to control*).

Various types of capabilities do not necessarily have clear boundaries. They interact with each other and with respect to their achieved functionings: it is a matter of local politics to describe how. Indeed, such a fuzziness is explained by socially-embedded conversion processes of resources, entitlements and rights into freedom or well-being. Individuals belong to different local communities with diverse norms of behavior and group loyalties, and they assume, within collectivities or groups, different social roles. Individuals and

communities are required to develop multi-fold capabilities at any stage of the circuit of the common in order to appropriate productive forces. Let us discuss why.

First of all, communities, social groups and collectivities must have the freedom to form associations for creatively managing and preserving commons but, for doing this, they need open education, sufficient resources and time for public debate and public reasoning. Furthermore, legal rights and institutional rules should foster bottom-up, self-governance organizations based on collective ownership and democratic decision making. These emergent associations of individuals and communities would engage an open, informed and multi-disciplinary discussion about how to organize shared resources into productive/re-productive units and, in doing this, they would be entitled to introduce innovative goods, services or technologies with viral and non-proprietary licenses.

Secondly, once collective organizations and institutions for managing commons are designed and established, members of collectivities need proper skills and entitlements for exploiting common-pool resources, moral awareness on preservation and/or expansion needs and relational abilities for managing conflicts and disputes.

Thirdly, if sharing a common-pool resource generates new production possibilities in terms of derived goods or services, democratic and not-profit-oriented production units (like cooperatives) would be free to operate in a clear, and reliable, normative framework through which to organize social production and peer-to-peer exchanges without markets or hierarchies.

Finally, to organize rules that specify rights and duties of social producers and to invest in new modes of production and usage creates a second-order common good that supports the birth of new forms of association for sharing more resources.

But, thence, if internal, external, collective, moral capabilities are all necessary for self-governing the common, how can we restrict our reasoning and identify some relevant capabilities from which to start from?

Capabilities for commons

In her scientific contributions, Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom has extensively investigated how to design long-lasting institutions that manage common resources, and the conditions under which self-governance organizations can successfully manage common resources. Take, for instance, the following list of design principles for long enduring, self-governance institutions (Ostrom, 1990):

define clear group boundaries;

match rules governing the use of commons to local needs and conditions;

ensure that those affected by rules can participate in modifying the rules;

make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities;

develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members behavior;

use graduated sanctions for rules violators;

provide dispute resolution mechanisms that are accessible and low-cost;

respect the right to organize of groups and communities;

build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system.

Straightforwardly, individuals, households or collectivities need a large array of capabilities in order to organize and manage their common resources through self-governing institutions. Without being exhaustive, we mention: internal, individual, *S-caps* for being able to assess relevant group boundaries and their modifications with respect to time and usage; collective, *S-caps* for building a credible, long-enduring rights system based on well-specified criteria of local justice; collective *O-caps* that makes possible for any social group to have voice in the process of rights and entitlements creation; *S-caps*, both individualistically and collectively conceived, which support the development of socially-accountable, costs-benefits analysis frameworks; collective *S-caps* for settling collective decision agreements, and *M-caps* for granting that collectivities can understand the moral consequences of any

collective choice rule. Socially-dependent capabilities are also necessary in collective monitoring activities, conflicts resolution and sanctions enforcement as well as multi-folded, democratic social interaction would ensure to all groups sufficient *O-caps* for being politically autonomous and not challenged by external governmental authorities.

As a final point, the above capabilities are specific to the type of common-pool resource we are dealing with, dynamic, and harder to develop in large, heterogeneous groups than in small, cohesive ones. Cultivating humanity for the common suffers, therefore, of both over-specification and under-specification problems. On the one hand, a general, exhaustive panel of capabilities for commons would contain as many entries as needed to empower individuals and groups in a post-capitalist order in which the common has subverted the capital. Surely, a very long list. On the other hand, many of these capabilities could be difficult to see before the circuit of the common is unfolded.

In order to deal with the circuit of the common, some capabilities must be developed; if they are not, we will have difficulty dealing with it. Let's provide some examples.

First, a common always implies a community. There is no common without a community holding it as such, without a community creating the common and using it. Such a community is a complex social system in which individuals and groups must be able to work collaboratively and cooperatively (Fournier, 2013). Being able to cooperate and to think collectively will make it easier to define group boundaries, to find feasible conflict-resolution mechanisms or collective decision rules. These *capabilities to act cooperatively* are influenced by individual skills, cultural contexts and moral traits.

Second, commons can be intangible, like knowledge, language, or culture. In these cases, their use is not rival along the lines of '*the more we share, the more we have.*' Consistently, new modes of co-production, ownership, exchange and benefits provision must be identified in a non-rival and non-competitive way. Being able to operate according to a non-profit, non-individualistic philosophy can ease the building of responsibility for governing common resources as well as the acknowledgment of multiple rights to organize new

management solutions. These *capabilities to think collectively* will be crucial to avoid the curse of commodification.

Third, as Linebaugh (2007: 279) emphasizes:

the common is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive.

Accordingly, the process through which commons are produced and maintained gives shape to the community, or *'in-forms'* the community (Euler, 2018). Due to this, it can be difficult to comprehend which new social practices have to support the reproduction of the commons if we are not able to adopt a creative and open political approach to social change. Adequate *capabilities to imagine social change* will support the matching between rules governing the use of commons and local conditions, and will foster direct participation of those affected by these rules to their definition.

Fourth, the *'commoning'* can be defined as an institutionalized, legal and infrastructural arrangement for a practice in which we collaboratively organize and take responsibility for the use, maintenance and production of common resources (Acksel et al., 2015). When a group engages in a commoning practice, it assumes some form of equality of participation, at least some sort of congruence between costs and benefits between its members. Hence, the exercise of commoning creates a sort of *relational good* based on *identity, motivations and simultaneity*, i.e., the good is co-produced and co-consumed, at the same time, by the actors involved (Gui and Sugden, 2005). Collectively being capable of developing notions of community, commons, and commoning is crucial along this creation process (Shariff, 2018). Without these *capabilities to conceive the common*, only private, market-oriented systems for governing common-pool resources will be possible.

Finally, any definition of the common must consider the diversity of uses of common resources (De Angelis and Harvie, 2013). The social meaning of a common is not fixed, but it changes according to how a society evolves. The diversity of legitimate uses reveals the cultural and political nature of commons. The collective meaning given to commons, from which legitimate uses are defined, is, therefore, a political statement that requires collectivities

able to manage and exploit diversity. These *capabilities to enhance diversity* are both moral and option-oriented, and they are useful to establish proper uses and fair sanctions for malevolent behaviour.

Concluding remarks

This paper addresses the development of post-capitalistic solutions to issues of commons management and preservation based on some capabilities for commons. Individuals participating in and sharing commons sustain social change. When an individual joins a group, and acts collectively for the benefit of the common, he/she generates changing and diverse stimulations which create changing and diverse actions/reactions in other group members. In this way, sharing commons, and working with others for such a result, can yield some important modifications in the way we define and develop our social self and perceive the common. Moreover, individuals actively involved in commons management and preservation focus their everyday activities on achieving the productive/re-productive conditions such that commons can satisfy some collective needs. In doing so, individuals develop their agency by participating in the social creation of living conditions. Productive results are freely accessible to all, and the organization of operating activities is carried out by participants themselves, i.e., participants determine rules of cooperation, decision-making procedures and conflict management mechanisms. Within the circuit of the common, continuous movements are organized to contrast attempts to commodify and capitalize on social invention, integration, mutuality and creative and cooperative forms of social organization (Hoedemækers et al., 2012).

Hence, the common can be seen as a new paradigm for societal reproduction. Commonism argues that needs-based exchanges take place before production, not *ex post* as with commodities. Before productive activities are implemented, different wishes and requirements of participants, as well as social conditions and priorities, are communicated, discussed and reconciled using democratic methods. Further, interpersonal relationships of reciprocity along the circuit of the common are usually *unconditional* (no conditional linking of taking to giving), *peer-to-peer* and *inclusive*. Self-selection of voluntary activities ensures truly motivated actions, while cooperation and

reciprocity facilitate general relations of inclusion (Neumüller and Meretz, 2019). Our paper suggests that these inclusive relations are more likely to cease if common capabilities are granted and developed along the circuit of the common at different levels.

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the author

Diego Lanzi is Adjunct Professor of Economics at the Department of Management, Department of Statistical Sciences and Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Bologna, and Adjunct Professor at the Department of Management, University Cà Foscari of Venice. Recent books include *Expressive rationality and choice* (2022) and *Economia dell'Ambiente* (2022).

Email: diego.lanzi@unibo.it