



Does capital need a commons fix?

Massimo De Angelis

Today economic crisis is a capitalist crisis of social stability, not a simple recession, that is, a crisis that requires a realignment of class/power relations and new systems of governance in order to re-establish growth and accumulation¹. The last two times in which a real change in capital's governance occurred (in the

1 For a discussion of crisis of social stability as opposed to other forms of crisis, say a recession, see De Angelis (2007a). Here social stability is defined as 'the stability of social arrangements and interaction in forms compatible with the accumulation process, the extensive commodification of life, particular forms of disciplinary processes of market interaction and extraction of work. It is ultimately a stability of the coupling between reproduction and production, between the value practices centred on life preservation in the broad sense and the value practices centred on the preservation of capital. Thus, there are potentially many instances in which social stability thus defined enters into crisis: [1] when capital is increasingly unable to guarantee access to the goods and services necessary for reproducing bodies and social cohesion corresponding to given "class compositions"; [2] or when the aspirations of new generations are at odds with the "deals" agreed by older generations and their struggles begin to shape the times; [3] or when subjectification has gone so far as to erase all hope and bring exasperation to large sectors of the population; [4] or when, on the contrary, hope is self-generated by social movements that challenge what they believe is the subordination of nature, dignity, peace, justice, life to greed, but that we can read as the systemic drive of accumulation; [5] or when a combination of these and other factors emerges in particular historical circumstances so as to threaten the legitimacy of many of the enclosures and integration practices and processes at the root of accumulation.' Today I believe we are closer to the first three of these cases, with some movements touching upon [4]. In any case, 'these are all the cases that, from the perspective of capital's conatus of self-preservation, require strategic intervention beyond mere repression and coercion. What capital needs here is an approach that allows the acknowledgment of the problems and issues at the basis of the crisis as "social stability", but at the same time co-opts them within the mechanism of accumulation and its value practices' (De Angelis, 2007a: 87-88).

post-World War II period with the embracement of ‘Keynesianism’ and in the late 1970s with the shift to neoliberalism) followed periods of intense social struggles that helped social movements imagine alternative socio-economic arrangements. Capital, fearing that ‘ideas gripping the masses’ might turn to propel a radical transformation, was suddenly willing to shift its ‘governance’ paradigm to accommodate some social demands while cutting deals with some segments of the movement and displacing the cost of doing the new paradigm onto other communities and environments across the globe. Pitting one sector of the social body against others has always been a strategy of capital development². But this time, things are getting a bit more complicated. My first thesis is that in facing *this* crisis of social stability capital faces an *impasse*. By ‘impasse’ I mean that vital support for the growth of the social system is no longer forthcoming in sufficient degree, especially from the *environment* in which the capitalist system operates.

Capital, understood as social force organizing social cooperation for the purpose of accumulation, has a twofold environment. The first is constituted by social systems that reproduce the various facets of life in non-commodified ways. Access to money is, at most, only a means through which needs are satisfied and not an end in itself, as it is for capital. When the purchased commodities exit the market sphere and enter the spheres of social cooperation (households, associations, networks, etc.), they often enter the complex, culturally and politically diverse and variegated sphere of the commons. It is here that the cultural and physical reproduction of labour power, the value-creating commodity so critically important for capital, occurs – outside the control of capital but, of course, strictly coupled to it.

The other system that capital depends upon is the ecological systems upon which all life and social organization depends. The *impasse* that capital faces consists of the devastation of systems of social reproduction through reductions of wages and welfare over the past 30 years as work has become more atomised, flexible and precarious. And the increasing inability of natural ecosystems to support

2 For an historical and theoretical discussion of how Keynesianism was founded on particular deals with sections of the working class, see De Angelis (2000). For a theoretical discussion of the relation between capitalist development and social stratification, see the interventions in *The Commoner*, 12(Spring/Summer), 2007. For a discussion of the current crisis along the lines proposed here, Midnight Notes Collective and Friends (2009).

capital in its endless quest for greater resource extraction and cost-shifting externalities, such as the free use of the atmosphere as a waste dump³.

In this sense, capitalism has reached an impasse, the overcoming of which, if done in its own terms, will produce a social and ecological apocalypse at worst, and an intensification of social conflict at best.

How can capital overcome this impasse? The difficulty lies in the fact that if the system has to survive it will have to continue to push for strategies of growth (i.e. accumulation). Capital's systemic necessity for growth derives not only from its elemental need for accumulation through a cost-cutting and cost-externalizing process of competition. Growth is also necessary as a way to reconcile a profit-maximizing mode of *production* with hierarchical modes of *distribution*. If 'all boats are lifted by a rising tide', there will be less pressure to address inequality and redistribution called upon by struggles for social justice.

Yet today, all the strategies and fixes available for capital to pursue growth in the world system, will only intensify the crisis of social and ecological reproduction, amplifying and widening the range of resistance even if there is no focal, programmatic point. Capital is therefore pressed to shift the mode of governance of social relations, or at least to fine-tune neoliberal governance in such a way to contain the costs associated to the crisis of social reproduction and limit public expenditures necessary to police and control the rebellions generated by the crisis. In either case, capital needs other systems and forms of sociability to fortify its agenda. The 'fix' needed by capital in condition of crisis of social stability cannot rely only on the usual fixes to adopt in times of cyclical recessions, that is periodic crises of over-accumulation that can be dealt with only with relocation of investment, localized devaluation of assets and labour power (De Angelis, 2007a: 270, n. 17) or spatial fix (Harvey, 1999), that is, the creation of the built environment to displace crisis.

This leads me to my second thesis: to solve or at least to address this impasse capital needs the commons, or at least specific, domesticated versions of them. It needs a *commons fix*, especially in order to deal with the devastation of the social fabric as a result of the current crisis of reproduction. Since neoliberalism is not about to give up its management of the world, it will likely have to ask the

3 It may be worthwhile to point out that this language of systems I use here is not a replacement for 'class' and 'power' based discourses. As I discuss in De Angelis (2007a), the effects of class struggle given certain power relations, and its precondition as a particular class composition, are both occurrences within capital's systemic dynamics.

commons to help manage the devastation it creates. And if the commons are not there, capital will have to promote them somehow.

On the other hand, commons are also systems that could do the opposite: they could create a social basis for alternative ways of articulating social production, independent from capital and its prerogatives. Indeed, it is difficult today to conceive emancipation from capital – and achieving new solutions to the demands of *buen vivir* social and ecological justice – without at the same time organizing on the terrain of commons, the non-commodified systems of social production. Commons are not just a ‘third way’ beyond state and market failures; they are a vehicle for *claiming ownership* in the conditions needed for life and its reproduction. The demands for greater democracy since the 1970s now exploding worldwide in the face of the social and economic crisis, are really grassroots democratic demands to control the means of social reproduction. Democratic freedoms imply personal investments and *responsibilities*, and commons are vehicles for negotiating these responsibilities and corresponding social relations and *modes* of production through what Peter Linebough calls ‘commoning’.

Hence, there is in fact a double impasse, for both capital and the social movements. Capital needs the commons to deal with the crisis as much as social movements need to confront capital’s enclosures of the commons in order to construct serious alternatives and prevent capital’s attempts to co-opt the commons. Hence, it is crucial not only to defend existing commons from enclosures, but also to shape new commons as they become a crucial terrain of struggle. This value struggle lies at the heart of the commons’ potential as a social system and force that might overcome the hegemony of capital. This struggle between the value-generating logic of the two systems has not been sufficiently addressed in commons literature.

Commons and capital as social systems

When we speak of commons and capital as social systems, we in the first place point at their unity, that is their common character in relations to non-social systems, what distinguishes them from non-social systems (for example a psychic, a biological or a mechanical system). In this sense, both commons and capital involve processes of self-reproduction, which in turn involve people and expenditure of their life-energies, involve communicative processes, the establishment of goals, and involve particular social relations. Autopoietic organization is a term we use to indicate processes of systems reproduction. An autopoietic system reproduces the elements it consists of through these elements

themselves and their operations. Social systems are autopoietically closed in the sense that while they use and rely on resources from their environment, those resources are only the substrata of the systems' operations. To clarify, although these resources are necessary, it is not these resources that generate the autopoietic operations of the social system, but every type of social system develop its own system-generated autopoietic operations. In the process of operating, they re-produce the social relations through which they operate⁴. Autopoiesis applies to the commons as to any other social system, although in different modes. We could thus reframe the Marxian concept of mode of production in terms of the specific ways in which autopoiesis occurs and is structured.

Thus, when we speak of commons and capital as social systems, we speak of them as having a distinct autopoietic organization from, say, biological or psychic systems. On the other hand, when we speak of commons and capital as *distinct* social systems, the character of this distinction cannot be attributed to the particular structural elements comprising them. For example, both commons and capital may employ high or low tech, make use of oil or not, have functions that require a certain level of authority, may or may not have a community divided into wealth hierarchies, although we expect these divisions to be far less in commons systems. Talking about commons therefore does not mean to talk about utopia, nor when we say capital we are pointing to dystopia. We certainly do not believe that capital can walk us to utopia, since its own *conatus* of self preservation is boundless accumulation, and the processes for actualising the latter are not only environmentally destructive, but also socially divisive and exploitative. But we certainly cannot claim that an expanded reproduction of commons will lead us inevitably to utopia, since 'utopias', to put it with Eduardo Galeano, are just 'horizons that allows us to walk'⁵ but the actual 'walking', or the process of evolution of commons that is in front of us, is a journey filled with challenges and power struggles, whose result nobody can anticipate. What we

4 This broadly follows Luhmann's (2012) idea of social systems as self-referential (operationally closed) systems. Systems consist of operations, while operating is what systems do. Autopoiesis literally means 'auto (self)-creation' (from the Greek: αὐτό – auto for 'self'; and ποιήσις – poiesis for 'creation or production'), or auto-reproduction. The term was originally introduced by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1972). The term was originally used to explain the emergence and reproduction of biological cells and bodily systems such as the metabolic system.

5 'Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance.' Translation taken from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/33846-utopia-lies-at-the-horizon-when-i-draw-nearer-by>.

can claim though is that the *autopoietic organizations* of commons and capital have a distinct character. The key questions therefore are: what is the organization that defines commons as a class of social systems? And what is the organization that defines capital as a class of social systems?

Commons are social systems in which not only resources are shared and communities set rules for this sharing, but the goal of autopoiesis is the reproduction of these shared resources and communities. The commons and their elements (communities and pooled resources) occur both at the beginning and at the end of a social process of commoning, of social cooperations among commoners⁶. All the same, in the money circuit of capital, money occurs both at the beginning and at the end of the process of expanded reproduction, or accumulation⁷. This illustrates the fact that the commons and money are an end in themselves in the two different systems, or, to put it in another way, they are autopoietically closed self-reproducing systems, systems that reproduce themselves, through the renovation of their elements and the recasting of their relations. While in one case, commons are for commons sake (and money at most an instrument for the reproduction of the commons), in the other case, capitals are systems in which money is for money's sake (and labour power and the environment at most an instrument to perpetuate accumulation).

An immediate conclusion about the specific autopoietic requirements of each system is that what we conventionally call 'economic growth' – which incidentally links to growth of greenhouse gases – is only an indispensable requirement for the sustainability of capital systems, not of commons systems. In principles, commons systems could reproduce themselves in a condition of what some environmentalist thinking has called 'a-growth'⁸ without at all undermining their expanded reproduction as autopoietical systems and improvement in the quality of their processes. Thus, overall reduction of GDP could at the same time be compatible with a betterment of living conditions through a) extension and pervasiveness of commons circuits, for example coinciding with relocalisation of many production chains (such as food and basic light manufacturing), the deep democratisation of many state functions, the communalisation of public utilities, the de-commodification of knowledge, education and culture, and b) the extension of the realms of non commodity

6 Peter Linebaugh (2008) rediscovered the use of this verb among the XIIIth Century English commoners describing their activities in the forest commons.

7 With this I mean circuits based on the M-C-M' formula (i.e. money-commodity-more money) that Marx discusses in Chapter 3 of *Capital*. For a discussion of contemporary capitalism following Marx's circuits analysis, see De Angelis (2007a).

8 For a discussion of this thesis see for example Latouche (2009).

exchanges, such as administrative or gift exchanges in Polanyi's tradition, and globalising solidarity economies. Indeed, both a) and b) can and have been conceived as part of virtuous hybrids with market functions, to the extent that we link them to simple commodity circuits (and not capital circuits). Take for example Community Supported Agriculture schemes. They do involve both commodity exchanges (i.e. farmers selling produce to consumers) and at the same time commoning between consumers and small farmers to negotiate quality, quantity and price of produce guaranteeing an income to farmers.

To regard commons as autopoietic social systems that operate outside of capital *in terms of their own operations*, allows us to locate them *either* outside or inside capital's *organizations*. Thus we find commons as community organizations and associations, social centres, neighbourhood associations, indigenous practices, households, peer-to-peer networks in cyberspace, and in the reproduction of community activities that are organized within faith communities⁹. However, we also find commons on the shop floor of capitalist factories and offices among co-workers supporting one another, sharing their lunch and developing forms of solidarity and mutual aid, or even organizing a strike, that is reproducing autopoietical systems that *from the point of view of their own operations* are quite distinct if not clashing, with the autopoiesis of capital. It is indeed only at the point of their distinct autopoiesis that we encounter the *untranslatability* between commons and capital.

Commons and capital

The relation between commons and capital is necessarily ambiguous, since their co-dependence and co-evolution makes it difficult to point out which of the two systems uses the other. This ambiguity can best be illustrated by looking at the paradigmatic role that the 'village commons' have in relation to capital. In a classic study, the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux argued that the work of reproduction and subsistence going on in the village commons in South Africa (mostly carried out by women) allows male labourers to migrate and be available

9 We must clarify here that my use of the term 'commons' does not necessarily match with the terms, institutional configurations and self-identities used by the members of a different variety of non-capitalist associations. For example, it is argued that the idea of commons does not work with indigenous communities, since, owing to different genealogies and practices, they talk about the 'communal'. (Mignolo, 2011) However, it is also true that catholic churches talk about 'communion', household members refer to families, neighbourhood associations talk about communities, many African people identify in tribes, and urban activists in Europe talk about 'social centres'. In my take, all these are different modulations of the theoretical construct I refer to as commons.

for employment for cash crop or other types of waged work. The work in the village commons reduced the cost of reproduction of these male workers since capitalists who hired them did not have to pay for the cost of their upbringing, or contribute to any social security in case of illness, unemployment or old age retirement (Meillassoux, 1981: 110-111). But Meillassoux also recognised the ambiguous character of the contemporary village commons. If the subsistence-producing commons is too ‘unproductive’, capital loses important aspects of the ‘free gift’ of labour power, while if it is too ‘productive’, fewer workers would migrate out of the village commons, pushing wages up (Caffentzis, 2004).

In other words, the relation between the commons and capital is a relation between two autopoietic social systems of production whose mutual interlocking and metabolic flows are regulated by the internal dynamic in each system.

This ambiguity at the heart of the relation between commons and capital means that questions of social powers (understood as access to resources and the sense-orientation of the commoners vis-à-vis capital) can be pivotal. The social contingencies of this struggle mean that questions of whether a commons can be co-opted cannot be addressed *ideologically*. The question of co-optation is a strategic field of possibilities, one that requires situated judgments based on context and scale. For example, many would argue that access by commons to markets, for example to meet some of their needs, is by definition evidence of their co-optation, while in fact it could be a contingent strategy of survival and a precondition for their reproduction.

One key variable in defining the outcome of this ambiguity is the wage rate, in both its ‘private’ and social component. A lower wage rate reduces, all other things being constant, the ability of people to spend time and pool social resources in the commons – to engage in commoning.

Some current examples of commons co-optation

The increasing dependence by capital on the commons does not curb its desire to enclose commons, however, as we see, for example, in the recent international land grabs now underway¹⁰. Rather, it is likely that, in addition to enclosures, capital will also attempt to use commons to fix many social problems created by the crisis and co-opt the commons as a possible challenge to capital’s management. Enclosures (the appropriation and expropriation of commons resources) and commons co-optation (the use of commons to work for capital

¹⁰ See essay by Liz Alden Wily at <http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/global-land-grab-new-enclosures>.

and not simply for the reproduction of commons themselves)¹¹ seem to be the two complementary coordinates of a new capitalist strategy.

This can be seen in the World Bank's approach to development in the Global South. For years it has emphasized the importance of some aspects of commons management, such as pooled resources, community participation, and 'trust' as social capital, all other things being constant. Whereas communities may create credit associations to pool savings and self-govern their distribution through 'financial money commons' (Podlashuc, 2009), development agencies rely on the same principles to tie communities to banks and microcredit institutions and so promote their dependence on global market circuits. In this fashion bonds of solidarity and cooperation that are nurtured in commons are turned into mutual control and the threat of shame to serve market interests (Karim, 2008).

In Britain, a coalition government of conservatives and liberal democrats have overseen massive cuts in public spending since 2010, and now are promoting a vision of 'Big Society' that claims to support community empowerment to address social upheavals. The agenda of the neoliberal era is continuing apace, as if no crisis has happened, even as the ruling class clearly recognises the social and environmental problems caused by this agenda. Unlike Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, who said that society 'does not exist', the conservative prime minister Cameron wants to turn it into a 'Big Society' – continuing a strategy of community involvement already pursued by New Labour in the UK, as well as by governments in the US and Canada (De Filippis et al., 2010: ch. 4). According to Cameron, governments urgently need to 'open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need' and to 'create communities with oomph'.

But this approach requires recognizing that resources are not simply financial, but the resources that lie dormant in fragmented and atomised communities, and need to be activated through some form of commoning. People need to take matters into their own hands by, for example, connecting diabetes patients, the elderly or the marginalised youth into self-help groups¹². There is of course nothing new about the idea of mobilising communities to clean up their neighbourhoods. But what seems to be emerging in discourses such as the 'Big Society' is a commitment to a faster speed and scale of change, since, as widely recognised, social innovation can take a long time to be adopted.

11 In system theory co-optation can perhaps be translated as 'structural coupling'.

12 In the U.K., this type of approach taps into the work of social entrepreneurs such as Hilary Cottam and Charles Ledbeater of www.participle.net.

Another discourse pioneered by capital to use the commons to serve its interests is the idea of ‘sustainable communities’; a term used in urban planning and design circles when proposing new financial centres, shopping malls or mega-venues like the Olympics. The basic idea of ‘sustainable communities’ is that they ‘can stand on their own feet and adapt to the changing demands of modern life’ (ODP, 2003). In other words, they do not decline while facing the on-going transformations that the relentless, ever-changing requirements of the global economy impose. But this idea – with its emphasis on education, training, environment, governance, participation, and, of course, sustainability, amounts to an oxymoronic utopia. It is a vision in which communities never seem to tire of playing competitive games with other communities somewhere else in the world in order to overcome the disruptions and inequalities of wealth and income inflicted by competitive markets. In this way ‘commoning’ is annexed to a divisive, competitive process in order to keep the whole game going. This oxymoronic ontology of our condition seems to be the key to the sustainability for capital (De Angelis, 2007b).

In all these cases, commoning is turned into something for a purpose outside the commons themselves. The purpose is not to provide alternatives to capital, but to make a particular node of capital – a region or a city – more competitive, while somehow addressing the problems of reproduction at the same time. But we must take heart in the fact that, in spite of capital’s strategies to use a commons fix to the problems it creates, while never really solving them, commons may well be part of a different historical development. The spectre of commonism is already starting to haunt the globe.

Conclusion

Writing in prison at a time of the consolidation of fascism in Italy, Antonio Gramsci wrote in an often-quoted passage: ‘The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters’ (Gramsci, 1971). A monster is an imaginary or legendary creature that combines parts from various animal or human forms. Fascism and Nazism were one type of this monster. Stalinism was another. Today, the articulation between capital, a system that recognises no limit in its boundless accumulation, and a system that must recognise limits because it is only from within limits that it can reproduce life, love, affects, care and sustainability, may well give way to another monstrous social construction... or not.

Much will depend on us. Whether the avenue ahead is one of commons co-optation or emancipation, is not a given. It will depend on political processes that

have yet to be developed. Although a critical analysis of capital is necessary, it is not sufficient. The ‘cell’ form of the social force that is responsible to establish and reproduce life (or alternatively, fail to sustain life, depending upon the power relations), and *by this* to abolish capital, we call today ‘the commons’. By cell form I here mean the general social form upon which this movement *can be* generated, the *sine qua non* without which no weaving of cells into a new social fabric without oppression, exploitation and injustice is possible. The commons is the cell form within which social cooperation for life-reproduction generates *powers-to*¹³ – *the only* basis by which people can multiply their powers to the *n*th degree through networked commons that overcome the boundaries of locality and challenge the *power-over* the commons established by different forms by capital.

There are at least two things that need to be taken into consideration in order to develop *powers-to* as an effective force. First, we should not romanticise commons. Actual commons can be distorted, oppressive or emancipatory. When we enter the system-like loops of an established commons, we immediately notice what’s at odds with our best-held values, beliefs and cultural mores. Too often however we decide to judge the commons on the basis of the values they express in relation to ours. Some activists tend to build communities based on political affinity, other on the basis of religious faith.

In these *identity-based* commons, a clear boundary is established around the commons that prevent it from expanding *unless* the outside embraces the values of the inside. ‘Conversion’ here is the main mechanism of commons development, a mechanism, however, so inadequate from the perspective of the challenges of building an alternative to capital in the midst of an emergent crisis of social reproduction. I have run across radical social centres that refused to engage with the local community on the terrain of reproduction because the cultural marks of that community did not match with the principles of the activists. Thus, instead of triggering a process in which these cultural marks could be engaged on the terrain of practice with the local community – for example by promoting forms of communalisation of reproduction such as child or elder care – clear identity boundaries were embedded in the social centre commons, thus ensuring its insularity and vulnerability. Identity politics here is a barrier to the development of new emancipatory identities through commoning.

13 For a discussion of *power-to* as contrasted to *power-over* see Holloway (2002). For a critical engagement in light of the problematic of the organization of alternatives to capital see De Angelis (2005).

Second, capital can be confronted only to the extent that commons of social reproduction, and of everyday life reproduction in particular (Federici, 2011), are developed as key sources of powers-to. The social reproduction commons are those commons developed out of the needs of its participants to reproduce some basic aspects of their own lives: health, food, water, education, housing, care, energy. The development of these commons is strategically crucial in developing emancipatory and progressive alternatives. Such commons must address people's basic needs and that empower them to refuse the demands of capital by offering access to alternative means of life.

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the author

Massimo De Angelis is Professor of Political Economy at the University of East London. He is editor of *The Commoner* web journal and author, among other works, of the *Beginning of History: value struggles and global capital* (Pluto: 2007). He is currently working on a new monograph on the commons.

E-mail: M.Deangelis@uel.ac.uk