



# Becoming a commoner: The commons as sites for affective socio-nature encounters and co-becomings

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## abstract

This paper draws attention to the somewhat neglected domains of affects, emotions, and subjectivity in the study of the commons. The paper argues that a focus on affective and communicative relations among humans and between humans and more-than-humans can enrich our understanding of the practices of commoning and the processes of *becoming* a commoner. Using the case of community forestry initiatives in Odisha, India, it illustrates how rural people become commoners through the embodied practices of caring for the forests as a shared common. The paper uses this empirical example and conceptual resources from affect theory and relational ontology to think about the commons as affective socio-nature entanglements and as a nurturing ground for subjectivity. It discusses the implications of attention on the commons and the practices of commoning for enabling the emergence of other-than-capitalist subjectivities.

## Introduction

Let us begin with the story of a pasture ‘open to all’ and the herdsman and his herd of sheep that Garrett Hardin uses to illustrate his prediction of the ‘tragedy of the commons’. Hardin’s herdsman, as a ‘rational being’, strives to maximize his gains by adding sheep to his herd until his actions inevitably lead to the degradation of the common grazing pasture (Hardin, 1968). In this ‘mini-maxi’ model of humans, where humans are seen to minimize efforts or inputs and maximize returns (Graeber, 2001: 6), the affective life of the shepherd is muted. In the picture that Hardin invites us to imagine, the pursuit of self-interest by all actors

leads to 'ruin for all'. This caricature does not take into account the possibility that the shepherd might grieve the loss of his green valley when it degrades, or that grief might galvanize him into action to avert the tragedy. The affective and communicative relations between the pasture and the shepherd and amongst the shepherds and their power to bring both the commoner and the commons into being remain invisible in this picture.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars working on common pool resources have extensively critiqued Hardin's prediction of the tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Elinor Ostrom's landmark work has been especially influential in showing that local communities can self-organize and craft institutions to avert this tragedy (see especially Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom and Gardner, 1993) and that private property or state authorities are not the only means by which to solve common pool resource problems. While common pool resources (CPR) work in the Ostrom tradition seeks an alternative to the powerful and reductive narratives derived from liberal and neoliberal economic theory, it tends to reproduce the very defining features of these narratives (Bresnihan, 2016). Working with the same methodological individualist assumptions of neoliberal economic theory that it critiques, it assumes that without proper rules, incentives, and sanctions, individuals will degrade and ultimately destroy common resources (Bresnihan, 2016; Cleaver, 2007). It thus pays insufficient attention to alternative conceptions of rationality and to humans as 'thinking-feeling' empathetic beings. This paper draws attention to this neglect and argues that attention on affective and communicative relations between the commons and the commoners can lead to more robust theorizing about the commons, and also possibly help in bringing together divergent ways of thinking about the commons.

The uses of the term *commons*, as McCarthy (2009: 498) points out, are manifold, and the term can be thought of as a 'keyword' in Raymond Williams' sense of the word. While CPR theorists predominantly focus on small-scale natural resources as shared commons, autonomous Marxists talk about 'the common' in the singular as a principle of organizing production and as the shared commonwealth of humanity. As enclosure of the commons intensifies, and all realms of life are increasingly commodified, the calls for reclaiming commons or inventing new commons are growing strong. These calls are coming from diverse sources that do not necessarily share similar theoretical foundations (McCarthy, 2006). On the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Linebaugh (2010) observes Hardin's 'rational' herdsman is likely to be a selfish or lonely herdsman. He says that in history, the commons have mostly been governed, and the greedy shepherd is likely to be punished by some community governance system.

<sup>2</sup> Hardin also admitted, in an article written in 1998 (p. 682), that 'the weightiest mistake' in the paper was the omission of the modifying adjective 'unmanaged'.

one hand, there are activists involved in struggles to ‘reclaim’ the historically enclosed commons, or reassert local rights over land, forests, and water bodies as part of the struggles against extractive capitalism; on the other hand, there are emerging practices of creating new commons, especially in the global North in spheres such as open-source software, urban gardens, and the reclamation of cities. Traditionally, CPR theory has engaged with shared natural resources, such as forests, land, and water bodies that need collectively respected rules to manage them. It has expanded its ambit to include non-material social and cultural resources such as information and intellectual property or even shared culture itself as the ‘new commons’ (for a review see Hess, 2012). In contrast to the work of CPR scholars, a growing number of commons activists suggest that diverse commoning projects represent ‘an alternative form of production in the make’ (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014: 195) and are reminders that ‘alternative social relations are entirely thinkable’ (McCarthy 2005: 16). Summing up this perspective, Federici and Caffentzis (2014) emphasize that the commons are not only the practices for sharing in an egalitarian manner the resources we produce but are also a commitment to the fostering of common interest in every aspect of our lives and political work. These activists advocate thinking about commoning as a set of generative practices that support sustenance and enhancement of life (Linebaugh, 2008; Bollier, 2014; Bollier and Helfrich, 2014).

As the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich, in his brief but powerful essay titled ‘Silence is a common’ (1983), reminded us that the process of ‘enclosure of the commons’ was not merely a physical takeover of the commons by the lords in eighteenth century England, but signified a shift in the attitudes of society towards the environment. This shift entailed seeing the environment as a resource to be exploited for human needs instead of as a commons to be cherished, shared, and nourished through practices of care (Illich, 1983). Resisting this dominant shift, indigenous peoples and other locally-rooted cultures around the world have often continued to view the common(s) as a source of sustenance of life that needs to be nurtured with relations of care<sup>3</sup> (Kimmerer, 2013; Sullivan, 2009; and many others). ‘Thinking and feeling with the Earth<sup>4</sup>’ (Escobar, 2016), these cultures

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<sup>3</sup> Instead of essentializing indigenous cultures, I am following scholars like Escobar and Ingold who emphasize how indigenous onto-epistemologies emerge from lived practices of dwelling in the environmental and making it home.

<sup>4</sup> Escobar’s idea of ‘Thinking and feeling with the Earth’ is based on Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1984)’s use of *sentipensar* and *sentipensamiento* to elaborate the ‘art of living based on thinking with both heart and mind’. The notion of *sentipensamiento* was later popularized by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano as the ability found among the popular classes to act without separating mind and body, reason and emotion (Escobar, 2016). These ideas resonate with a Spinozian perspective of affects.

often embrace a stance of deep interdependence and a sense of ‘being-in-common’ with the rest of the world. This perspective underpins countless examples of place-based movements and resistance against extractive industries around the world. For example, Mapuche activists protesting petroleum extraction from Vaca Nuerta in Argentina assert, ‘Our territories are not “resources” but lives that make the Ixofijmogen<sup>5</sup> of which we are part, not its owners’ (cited by de la Cadena, 2015a). This perspective is also reflected in the work of feminist scholars (Shiva, 1988; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999; Federici, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 2011) and the recent work of anthropologists (de la Cadena 2015b; Tsing 2010) who emphasize on the need to nurture the commons through an ethics of care.

The calls for commoning emanating from this tradition highlight the revolutionary potential of the commons in anti-capitalist struggles (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; de Angelis, 2013); the commons’ capacity to perform counter-hegemonic common(s) senses (Garcia Lopez et al., 2017); and the need to include more-than-humans in our thinking about the commons’ community (Breshninan, 2016). Building on this work, I emphasize the need to conceptualize and nurture the commons as a site for becoming a commoner. I argue that the commons can be conceptualized as a site of affective socio-nature encounters or as affective socio-nature relations that can foster subjectivities of ‘being in common’ with others. I emphasize that thinking in terms of affective relations and the work that commons *do* (other than producing goods or resources) provides a helpful way of bringing together diverse ways of thinking about the commons.

The paper engages a critical question of our times, which is how to transform our ways of being human and relating to the rest of the world. Felix Guattari (1995: 119-20) once eloquently said that one of the most pressing questions of our times is ‘how do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity – if it ever had it – a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet?’ I bring attention to the potential of the commons and practices of commoning to nurture this sense of responsibility by posing the following questions: What are the conditions that foster affective relations between the commons and commoners? How do people become commoners and imbibe norms that foster other-regarding behavior and support collective action to govern the commons?

With the affective turn, Western social sciences and humanities are embracing perspectives that are remarkably similar to indigenous ontologies. Using

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<sup>5</sup> Ixofijmogen, the Mapuche concept of ‘biodiversity’, resonates with the perspective of seeing the forest as kin or a parent amongst other indigenous peoples (de la Cadena, 2015a).

conceptual resources offered by affect theory and relational ontology in conjunction with my empirical work with forest communities in Odisha, India, I argue that we need to think of the commons as 'affective socio-nature relations' and practices of commoning as a means of nurturing this relationship. I argue that a focus on affects and affective relationality helps to transcend the dualism of subject and object, the commons and the commoners, and encourages us to think instead of the commons and commoners as co-constituted through intersubjective communication and affective relations. Doing so helps us to envision alternate ways of valuing nature and to see the commons as a site for fostering subjectivities of being commoners.

I begin with a brief description of the empirical context of my work which, to use Guattari's imaginary here, is for me the 'force to think with'. In subsequent sections, I discuss theoretical resources on affects, affective relationality, and subjectivity and how they lead to different ways of conceptualizing human and human-nature relationality. These two theoretical sections are followed by a discussion of how these conceptual resources help us to think about the production of the commons and commoners through affective socio-nature relations. I conclude with a discussion on practical implications of using theories of affect to think about transformations in environmental behavior and subjectivities.

### **Collective action to conserve forests in Odisha, India**

Odisha's case of collective action to conserve forests is the empirical context that informs my work and the theoretical arguments in this paper. My engagement with community forestry initiatives in Odisha spans more than twenty-five years and the theoretical arguments in the paper emerge from this long engagement. The state of Odisha lies on the eastern coast of India. It is one of the poorest provinces in the country as per the traditional economic parameters of assessing poverty. Almost 80 percent of the state's population is rural and depends on subsistence agriculture. Forests play an important role in the rural subsistence economy and have been the site of acute contestations following their enclosure by the colonial state.

As was the case elsewhere in India, the British delineated large tracts of Odisha's geographical area as forests and brought them under state control. This enclosure of commons as state-owned forests disrupted local forest-people relationships and governance arrangements similar to those described for other parts of India in the vast literature on environmental history (among others, these include Guha, 1990; Gadgil and Guha, 1993; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999). The post-colonial state

continued with the colonial forest governance framework and forests were charted into the nation-building project. Various state governments prioritized commercial extraction of timber and pulp for paper industries over local needs. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the effects of extensive commercial timber extraction combined with unrestricted local use had started becoming visible. Many villages started experiencing serious shortages of supply of wood and forest products due to degradation of forests. In some cases, villagers narrated that the forests had become so degraded and the wood so scarce that they had begun digging out the roots of trees to use as fuel. In one village, people recounted the frustration they experienced when they could not find wood for a cremation pyre for a homeless man. When confronted with such dire situations, villagers realized that they needed to do something before it was too late. Triggered by such experiences, many villages decided to devise rules and undertake patrolling measures to protect their local state-owned forests. By the 1990s several thousand villages were actively protecting neighboring forests through community-based arrangements. It is estimated that as many as 10,000 villages in Odisha have elaborate community-based forest governance arrangements (for descriptions and details of such governance arrangements see Human and Pattanaik, 2000; Kant et al., 1991; Singh, 2002).

These collective arrangements to conserve forests emerged in the absence of formal rights over forests<sup>6</sup> and without any financial incentives to trigger conservation. They are typical examples of collective actions documented by scholars working on the commons in the Ostrom tradition. They demonstrate how local residents, or the commoners, do not stand as silent spectators in the face of an unfolding ‘tragedy’ but rather devise rules to self-govern and avert the tragedy through a ‘bottoms-up crafting of institutions’ (cf. Haller et al., 2016). In many of these conservation initiatives, people have borne enormous personal costs to protect forests. In the district of Nayagarh, for example, several villages made the decision to give up goat rearing for many years to help the forest regenerate by alleviating grazing pressure. Though not a common occurrence, there have been several instances where villagers on patrolling duty have been murdered by small-time timber mafia, and individuals have often guarded forests at considerable risk to their own lives. While Ostrom’s design principles for collective action explain how collective action is sustained and institutions endure over time, institutional approaches do not offer good explanations about what drives people to protect forests, often risking their own lives, or what fosters the intimate relationship that

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<sup>6</sup> India’s Recognition of Forest Rights Act (FRA), enacted in 2006, provides for recognition of community rights over forests. This law is yet to be fully implemented, and the community forestry initiatives in Odisha predate this law.

underpins such actions.<sup>7</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere in greater detail (Singh, 2013, 2015), villagers in Odisha have forged intimate relations with forests in the process of taking care of them.

Through their embodied caring labour, local residents have not only grown forests but also their sense of community and 'being-in-common' with the rest of nature and with each other. In the process, they have cultivated new subjectivities of being forest caregivers (Singh, 2013). The villagers use a local system for sharing forest patrolling labour, called *thengapalli*, in which a walking stick is passed around signaling a household's turn to contribute labour for forest patrolling. Partaking in *thengapalli* provides an opportunity for villagers to enter into an embodied relationship with the forest. Usually two to four people go to the forest daily for *thengapalli*. In Dengajhari village in Nayagarh, where I recently undertook a participatory videography project, women described to me how their daily patrolling work is made into an event of joyful sociality. One woman described it thus,

Someone takes salt, someone dry fish, and someone mango kernel. ...We all sit together and eat. We watch (keep a vigil on the forest) till evening and then return home.

Another added,

We tell our children, 'come, let us go to the forest. Fruits or roots whatever we will get, we will eat. We will have a feast'. The children accompany us happily. We cook and eat inside the forest and return home in the evening.

The daily patrolling trips thus provide opportunities for affective sociality in which intimate knowledge and ways of relating to nature emerge (Raffles, 2002), and the forests become sites of constituting social relations (cf. Gururani, 2002). Through the daily patrolling trips for *thengapalli*, villagers come to know the forest intimately and learn to respond affectively to its needs for care. Women often gather a variety of berries, dig tubers and root vegetables, and gather greens for cooking while on patrolling duty in the forest, while at the same time looking out for any instances of fresh cutting of trees in the forest. These everyday actions and performances (cf. Garcia Lopez et al., 2017) foster or reinforce affective relations. In view of the material dependence on the forest, local villagers had strong affective ties to begin with, and active care of the forest as a cherished common further strengthened these affective ties. People began to care for the forest – including the trees, plants, and the wildlife that returned to the forest as it regenerated – in the same way as intimate social relations are developed, by spending time together

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<sup>7</sup> For a good overview of emergence of institutions see McKay (2002).

and paying attention to each other. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000: 47) argues that hunter-gatherers in widely separate parts of the world view forests as parents, and he suggests that 'to speak of the forest as a parent is not to model object relations in terms of primary intersubjectivity, but to recognize that at root, the constitutive quality of intimate relations with non-human and human components of the environment is one and the same'. Similarly, anthropologist Nurit Bird-David illustrates that the Nayaka in South India develop intimate relations with the forest 'by spending time with them' and by investing in the relation the same 'care, feeling and attention' (1992: 29-30) that they do in social relations. Through *thengapalli*, the labour of patrolling and taking care of the forests is dispersed, and the opportunity to develop an affective relationship with the forest through active attention is shared broadly within the community. In my research, I have found that when villagers delegate patrolling responsibilities to a hired watchman, they have fewer opportunities to develop affective relations with the forest, which dramatically diminishes their overall enthusiasm for the forest. Even though other activities, such as visiting the forest to gather wood or other forest produce, offer opportunities for an embodied connection, *thengapalli* offers a different attunement to the forest due to the labour invested in its care. This resonates with Norton et al.'s (2012) findings about the so-called IKEA effect, which suggests that people love what they create, especially when their labour leads to successful completion of tasks. Still, more systematic research is needed to understand the processes and conditions that lead to affective relations between people and forests.

Understanding the conditions that lead to these affective relations and foster environmental subjectivities is of central importance for fostering care of the commons. In the following sections, I elaborate the conceptual ideas about affect and affective relationality followed by a discussion about subjectivity and discuss how attention on affects and subjectivity helps think about fostering the subjectivity of being a commoner.

### **Affect and affective relationality**

In recent years, the social sciences and humanities have seen an explosion of interest in the ideas of affect and emotions. What is now labeled as the 'affective turn' in cultural studies (Clough and Halley, 2007) has been animated by different orientations to affect that range from Silvan Tomkin's psychobiological approach to Deleuze's Spinozist ethology of bodily capacities (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). I draw upon the Spinozian theory of affects as elaborated in the work of Brian Massumi, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Giles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, among others. Affect in this formulation is seen as the power to affect and be



affected, and the relationship between these two powers (Hardt, 2007). Affect is different from emotions as conventionally understood and denotes a relational force that flows between bodies and which enhances or diminishes their power of acting (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). To affect and be affected is to be open to the world and to the possibility of being transformed through this engagement with the material world.

Affect is a pre-cognitive and transpersonal intensity that flows through and defines bodies – where bodies are not limited to human bodies. Initially nameless and potentially ‘unruly’, relational affects often consolidate and manifest as emotions and emotion episodes are themselves specific affective dynamics, temporarily stabilized by patterns of reflection and narration (Slaby et al., 2016). To fully capture the entirety of human experience, it is important to focus on the interrelated domains of feelings, emotions, and affects, and to recognize that they are a necessary accompaniment of cognition and rationality (instead of an impediment to it).<sup>8</sup> Also, attention on affect does not mean an inversion of Descartes’ proposition ‘I think, therefore I am’ into ‘I feel, therefore I am’. Rather, it compels appreciation that thinking and feeling are inseparable. And the ‘I’ that appears as stable and fully formed is relationally entangled in the processes of becoming. Thus a more appropriate proposition might be ‘I feel, think, and relate and therefore I become’. And this becoming is necessarily a process of ‘becoming with’ the many others with whom we share this planet (Haraway, 2008). This perspective is echoed in indigenous thought and activism around the world, for example in this assertion by an Indigenous Elder in Guatemala, ‘I am the land that thinks’ (Desjarlais, 2014), or in Escobar (2016)’s examples of ‘Epistemologies of the South’ in which many different ways of understanding the world emerge from ‘Thinking and feeling with the Earth’.

Scholars associated with the affective turn have pointed out that Spinozian philosophy and his theory of affects inspires ecological thinking (Bennett, 2009; Smith, 2012) and enables a ‘dialectics of the positive’ (Ruddick, 2010) given its emphasis on relations, possibilities, and emergences. Spinoza’s conception of *conatus* as a striving of all bodies to continue to exist and enhance the scope of their existence further supports an ecological perspective that decenters humans. Instead of the striving for utility maximization that dominates economic imagination, Spinoza offers *conatus*, that is, a striving for associations that enhance our capacity to act and give us joy (Read, 2015). Spinozian theories about affect and *conatus* support a relational ontological perspective that shifts attention

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<sup>8</sup> As I elaborate later, neuroscience and behavioral economics are also emphasizing this aspect; especially notable is the work of Antonio Damasio and Dan Ariely, among many others.

from essences or totalities to relations, emergence, and co-becomings. In this ontological perspective, humans and 'human nature' are seen as emergent rather than fixed and immutable.

Challenging the conception of humans as *homo economicus*, a Spinozian perspective suggests that we are not only hardwired to maximize utility but are also driven by the desire to care, give, and be valued as givers. Questioning the *homo economicus* model of humans is, of course, not new. Starting with Amartya Sen's (1977) essay titled 'The Rational Fools', the rational economic actor has been challenged in diverse disciplines, and alternate conceptions of humans have gained ground. In evolutionary biology, for example, Jeremy Rifkin's work (2009) shows that cooperation and empathy are important evolutionary traits, and Frans de Waal (2010) further elaborates that humans are not the only species capable of displaying empathy and a preference for fairness and justice (also see Brosnan and de Waal, 2003). In the field of behavioral economics, a large body of literature establishes that emotions and the subconscious realm play an important role in human decision-making (Norton et al., 2011) and that we are often 'predictably irrational' (Ariely, 2008). Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's work (1999, 2003) shows that emotions and rationality are intermeshed and that our ability to make decisions relies on and mobilizes our ability to feel. Furthermore, thinking and feeling happens not only in our brains but is also connected to embodied ways of being and negotiating our way through the environment. Neuroscience is thus confirming what Spinoza intuited more than three centuries ago and expressed in the form of his theory of mind and body parallelism.

To return to our herdsman and his herd, the herdsman's decision to add another sheep – or not – is not solely a rational decision but is an affective decision made by a thinking-feeling-relational being in response to cues from her social and biophysical environments. In addition to governance institutions, affects and affective capacities play a central role in shaping both the shepherd's socio-natural environment and her responses to it. Moreover, the shepherd is not a stand-alone actor but a relational being entangled in a complex set of relations with other human and nonhuman actors. The process of 'dwelling in the environment' (Ingold, 2000) entails not simply the most efficient extraction of 'resources' from one's environment but the forging of relations of care and reciprocity with nature and other species in the process. The self that emerges through these affective socio-natural interactions differs from the atomized individual subject of Western thought. This self includes a sensibility and concern for the well-being of others with whom it is relationally entangled, a point that I elaborate in greater detail in the following section on subjectivities.

## Subjectivity and the commons

Philosophers and activists alike have highlighted that the current ecological crisis demands us to rethink our modes of being human (Plumwood, 2007; Klein, 2015). As feminist eco-philosopher Val Plumwood (2007: 1, cited in Roelvink, 2013) puts it:

If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure...to work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves...We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all.

Reinventing a different mode of being human is thus one of the most critical challenges of our time, which compels attention to the conditions of subjectivity formation.

Subjectivity, which can be broadly understood as ‘ways of perceiving, understanding, and relating to the world’ (Read, 2011) or ‘one’s sense of what it means and feels like to exist within a specific place, time, or set of relationships’ (Morales & Harris, 2014: 706), has been an important concept of academic research since the 1960s. But in nature-society studies, the issue of subjectivities has been relatively neglected (Morales and Harris, 2014). This is changing, however, with an increasing realization that the crisis of the environment is connected fundamentally to human ways of being and relating to the world.

Some of the recent works in nature-society studies on the issue of subjectivity include Arun Agarwal’s deployment of the Foucauldian notion of governmentality to understand how subjects develop disciplinary environmentality (Agrawal, 2005); Andrea Nightingale’s work on the role of emotions in the production of subjectivity (Nightingale, 2011); and Robert Fletcher’s elaboration of Foucault’s different modalities of governmentalities to understand neoliberal conservation (Fletcher, 2010). While there is growing body of work by feminist political ecologists and science and technology studies scholars (Latour, 2004; Nightingale, 2013; Sultana, 2011; Whatmore, 1997) that shows that subjectivities emerge from engagement with the world, ‘the subject’ of Western social sciences as a stand-alone actor is yet to be dethroned. In my earlier work (Singh, 2013), I have critiqued the emphasis in governmentality-inspired approaches on the making of the subject and invited attention instead on the processes of becoming and the emergence of collective subjectivities through affective relations and immersion in one’s total (social and biophysical) environment (also see Milton, 2002; Ingold, 2000).

Here, I deepen this analysis by arguing that we need to analyze how collective subjectivities emerge from the entangled affective ecologies of nature, society, and the self. Thinking in terms of ‘affective ecologies’ allows us to think transversally

across the three ecologies of 'nature, society, and the self' that Felix Guattari (1989) encourages us to do. Affect theory presents analytical tools for such transversal thinking that unravels the conditions for our subjectification.

The commons, as autonomous Marxist Antonio Negri tells us, are not just resources for supporting material existence but are sources for nurturance of our subjectivity. Enclosure of the commons, thus, is not just a physical enclosure and 'primitive accumulation of wealth' by the elite but is fundamentally a process of 'primitive accumulation of the conatus' (Read, 2015, citing Albiac, 1996: 15) through homogenization of subjectivities and the creation of a 'one-world world' while limiting other worlds and 'anthropos-not-seen' (de la Cadena, 2015a). It denotes a loss of control over the conditions for the production of subjectivity. As Read (2011) puts it, Marx's concept of alienation denotes 'not a loss of what is most unique and personal but a loss of connection to what is most generic and shared, i.e., it is a separation from the conditions of the production of subjectivity' (124).

The current capitalist order is not only destroying the natural environment and eroding social relations but is also engaged in a far more insidious and invisible 'penetration of people's attitudes, sensibility, and minds' (Guattari and Negri, 1990: 53). Freeing up the conatus, or human striving, from the narrowly defined striving of utility maximization, and allowing alternate ways of being and subjectivities outside of the dominant market logic to emerge, is fundamental to the process of revival of the commons. Revival of the commons, then, becomes critical not simply from the perspective of restoration of access and control over physical resources, but from the perspective of countering this alienation and finding a way to produce alternate subjectivities and alternate worlds. From this perspective, we need to reclaim the commons as material resources not only for subsistence and livelihood but also as the grounds for the production of subjectivity. As Read (2011) emphasizes, the struggle over the commons, including the knowledge commons and the digital commons, is as much a struggle over the forces and relations that produce subjectivity as it is a struggle over wealth and value (Read, 2011).

In view of this, commons scholars need to pay attention to the conditions of subjectivity production in addition to institutions, discourses, and power relations that shape the production or disappearance of the commons. Beyond the structure-agency dualism, this perspective helps us appreciate, as Guattari says, that '[v]ectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual'; rather, the individual is 'something like a terminal for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data processing machines etc.' (Guattari, 2000 [1989]: 25). Expanding subjectivities beyond the realm of the psyche, we need to theorize and analyze them as collectively experienced and not only a means

of understanding and making sense of the world, but also as a major force shaping the world that we live in.

For conceptualizing and analyzing subjectivities as collective and emergent from the 'in-between space' of structure and agency, philosopher Gilbert Simondon's theory about individuation is very useful. Simondon (1924-1989) is one of the most inventive thinkers of twentieth-century philosophy whose work has been somewhat neglected within the English-speaking audience. His work, however, has influenced philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, who use Simondon's theory of individuation centrally in their work. Simondon's ideas help us to focus on the process of individuation, that is, the process through which a being becomes an individual, and conceptualize it as not only a psychic but also a psycho-social process. Through his theory of transindividuality, Simondon questions the centrality of the individual and the principle of individuation within Western philosophy (Read, 2015; Combes, 2013). He argues that the Western notion of the individual tends to equate existence, or 'being', with 'being as an individual', and it ignores existence that is prior to or outside of existence as an individual. In privileging the essence of things, it overlooks the fact that the ultimate reality is made up of 'relations, tensions and potentials' (Read, 2015). In contrast to historically reductionist ways of looking at social phenomenon as either emerging from rational actions of isolated individual actors or as a product of social structures, Simondon's ideas help us grasp the productive nexus from which both individualities and collectivities emerge (Read, 2011). According to Simondon, 'the conditions of our subjectivity, language, knowledge, and habits are neither individual nor part of any collective, but are the conditions of individual identity and collective belonging, remaining irreducible to each' (Read, 2011: 113). His ideas have been taken up by Deleuze and Guattari to reconceptualize the self as 'spatialized, decentered, multiple, and nomadic' in contrast to the conventional view of the self as 'coherent, enduring, and individualized' (Rose, 1998).

This reconceptualization of the subject is supported by two of Simondon's theses (Virno, 2004). The first thesis states that *individuation is never concluded*, which suggests that the pre-individual is never fully translated into singularity, rather the subject is the interweaving of pre-individual elements and individuated characteristics (*ibid.*: 78). The subject is a composite mix of 'I' and 'one', 'standing for unrepeatable uniqueness, but also anonymous universality' (*ibid.*). For example, the subjectivity of being a forest conservationist in Odisha is an interweaving of the individuated 'I' and an anonymous collective 'one' who depends on sensory perceptions of the species, the collective heritage of language and forms of cooperation, and the general intellect. The day-to-day embodied practices in the forest, through which *one sees* the *mahua* flowers spread on the forest floor, *smells* its intoxicating scent, and *feels* the shade of the tree in the

smoldering heat as one gathers and *touches* the flower are all affects that depend on senses that are part of a generic biological endowment (Singh, 2013).

Simondon's second thesis states that the collective, or the collective experience, is not the sphere within which the salient traits of a singular individual diminish or disappear; 'on the contrary, it is the terrain of a new and more radical individuation' (Virno, 2004: 78). This thesis leads Simondon to conclude that 'within the collective we endeavor to refine our singularity, to bring it to its climax' (*ibid.*: 79). Simondon thus insists that we 'seek to know the individual through individuation rather than individuation through the individual' and that we focus on the *process* of individuation rather than look for a *principle* of individuation (Combes, 2013: 2). In doing so, he calls for a radical understanding of the process wherein a principle is not only put to work but is also constituted through the process. Such a processual understanding of subjectivity has important implications for rethinking the notion of the subject in political thought and practice.

These ways of conceptualizing the self and subjectivity resonate strongly with indigenous views of thinking about the self as entangled with the rest of the world (de Castro, 2015; Kohn, 2015; Ingold, 2000; Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013, Escobar, 2016, among others) and also with emerging insights in biology and physical sciences (Barad, 2007; Escobar, 2007; Weber, 2016). Indigenous cultures around the world give primacy to relations and relational existence that emerge from their stance of connectedness, gratitude, and solidarity with the rest of the world. In this view, the self is not seen as an autonomous subject acting on the world, but as a relational emergence responding to the world. In the recent academic turn to the ideas of affect, materiality, and relationality, the connections and intellectual debt to indigenous thought are not acknowledged adequately (Escobar, 2016; Todd, 2016) and there are calls for seeking connections between Indigenous thinkers and Western scholars driving the 'affective' or 'new materialist' turn in social sciences in ways that are not colonizing.

Commons scholars and activists are well-positioned to contribute to the cross-fertilization of these ideas and to explore empirically and theoretically how different ways of being in the world are conditioned by ways of relating to the commons. A critical opening to explore is how different understandings of the self and relational ethics *emerge* from certain ways of being with the world and how Indigenous perspectives about the commons can offer ways of nurturing a stance of interdependence and care for the more-than-human world.

Returning to my example of community initiatives to conserve forests, a processual understanding of subjectivity helps us explore how embodied practices

of caring for the forest lead to subjectivities of ‘forest caregivers’, whose sense of the self includes thinking about forest conservation. Through the process of taking care of their local forests and creating conditions for the forest’s enrichment, villagers have not only regenerated forests but have cultivated or strengthened subjectivities of being conservation-oriented and of being commoners. The subjectivity of being forest caregivers emerges from their everyday actions of caring for the forest. These caring practices include patrolling the forest, picking up dead and dried wood, removing weeds, picking berries, and so on and so forth to support the conditions for forests’ regeneration and enrichment. These activities draw people into affective relations with their local forests, its vegetation, and its wildlife and generate a sense of ‘being-in-common’ with the forest and with the other members of human community. Affects play an important role in the process and are the medium by which intersubjective relations with their social and natural environment are strengthened, as a growing body of literature is now beginning to appreciate (Anderson, 2009; Sultana, 2011; Nightingale, 2013; Milton, 2002; Dallman et al., 2012, among many others). These affective relations are similar to the relations of care and affection that people are likely to develop with pets as ‘companion species’ (Haraway, 2008) or relations of love with plants in one’s garden (Archambault, 2016). In this case, affective relations with forests are also shaped by the materiality of the forest and local subsistence dependence on it. These affective relations are further strengthened through conservation care practices and play an important role in strengthening subjectivities of being a commoner in active relationship with the forest and with other villagers who share these landscapes. This subjectivity of ‘being-in-common with’ is eloquently summed up in this proclamation by one of the community leaders: *Samaste samaston ko bandhi ke achanti*, which implies that ‘all [bodies] are holding everyone else together’ – a sentiment that resonates with the idea of affective relations tying everyone together into a collectivity. Although he was referring to social relations and relations of accountability within a social setting, he could have been espousing relational ontology and echoing a Spinozan conception of collective bodies.

These new subjectivities of forest conservationists include a sense of being part of a community of forest caregivers and of having affective relations with the forests that they have cared for. As I have emphasized in my earlier work, it is important to understand that these relations and ways of relating are not ‘natural’ to ‘Indigenous’ peoples or an essential part of their culture; rather, these ways of being emerge from affective interactions. By creating conditions for such emergences, these kinds of subjectivities can be fostered. Understanding the conditions that enable such emergences, then, becomes critical from the perspective of nurturing alternate subjectivities and post-capitalist futures. Examining how subjectivity is produced becomes critical and an important

political project as it can help us understand, as Read (2011: 114) puts it, 'how subjectivity might be produced otherwise, ultimately transforming itself, turning a passive condition into an active process'. The multitudes of examples of collective action for reclaiming or creating new commons are appropriate sites to explore processes contributing to the production of subjectivity.

### **From commons to commoning: Commons as affective socio-nature relations and commoning as world-making practices**

In recent years, the concept of the commons has become central to anti-capitalist struggles. Diverse projects for commoning that include community gardens, local currencies, community supported agriculture, bio-cultural restoration efforts, peer-to-peer production initiatives, and so on (see Bollier and Heinrich, 2015, for several dozen examples). A wide range of activists and practitioners are invoking the vocabulary of the commons to defend the disappearing material commons as well as to expand non-material commons as practices for building communities, solidarity, and alternate subjectivities (De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010, De Angelis, 2013). In so doing, commoning is seen as a world-making practice that leads the creation of 'a collective subject or multiple collective subjects' who foster the common interest in every aspect of our lives and political work (Federici and Caffentizis, 2014). Commoning is seen as a way to reclaim control over our lives and over the conditions of our reproduction (*ibid.*).

In contrast to the CPR scholars who focus on the commons as shared natural resources, autonomous Marxists refer to 'the common' as a singular and following Hardt and Negri's lead maintain that 'the common' is not only the earth that we share but also the 'languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships, and so forth' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 139). In this invoking of humanity's commonwealth they emphasize that instead of seeing humanity as separate from nature, as either its exploiter or its custodian, such a notion of 'the common' focuses on 'the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). While natural resource commons in the CPR theories are defined in terms of rivalry and possibilities of exclusion, the cultural and intellectual commons are not subject to a similar logic of scarcity and exclusionary use (McCarthy, 2006) and are rather seen as abundant. The cultural common, Hardt and Negri (2009: 139) write, 'is dynamic, involving both the product of labor and the means of future production'.

While this diversity in talking about the commons creates analytical challenges, it also offers productive openings, by drawing attention to the world-making possibilities of commoning practices to create the pluriverse, that is, the Zapatista



vision of a 'world where many worlds fit' (Escobar, 2016). The analytical lens of affect and relational ontology helps bring to light the productive overlaps between these diverse ways of thinking about the commons. It helps us to think of the commons as 'affective socio-nature relations' and as sites of affective encounters productive of novel subjectivities. The commons are not just shared natural resources but are also our shared affective capacities to act and respond, and these affective capacities shape encounters, driven by *conatus* or striving as a force for becoming. The commons are thus sites for affective encounters between humans and the more-than-human material world, as well as practices that nurture these relations. Thinking in relational terms about affective encounters helps us appreciate the important role of the more-than-human actors in the production of the commons and commoners. The commons, both as material resources and as conditions for subjectivity, get produced due to the coming together of the labour and creative energies of humans and more-than-human actors. And value emerges from this coming together, and thus what we need to cherish, value, and advance are opportunities for such coming together and for co-flourishing. Seeing commons as spaces for affective encounters between humans and more-than-humans helps us appreciate that they are the nurturing grounds for fostering what Haraway terms 'response-ability' – that is, our ability to respond ethically to the demands of the many others with whom we share this world. Commons are nurtured through commoning practices that, in turn, enable us to think, feel, and act as a commoner.

Such a perspective helps us to think about the commons not just as *lived-in* landscapes but as *living* landscapes that are alive with dynamic social and ecological relations. The Western social sciences are now engaging with renewed interests in the material world and are insisting that this 'new materialism' take the vitality of all matter and agency of the more-than-human world more seriously and inspire an environmentalism that is driven by a deeper love for the material world (Bennett, 2009). Instead of using the God's eye perspective of seeing the world as fully knowable from the outside, and largely as dead matter, the ontological revisioning ushered in by the ideas of vibrant materiality helps see us the world as alive and things and beings always in the process of making – a process, moreover, that can only be experienced and explained from partial, situated perspectives. The latest developments in the sciences, especially within quantum physics and new biology, also lend support to these perspectives of connectedness, emergence, and contingency.

While these ideas may be new, or newly rediscovered, in the social sciences, they form the bedrock of Indigenous worldviews, where the world is seen as alive and as an active participant in the unfolding of human drama instead of being merely an inert backdrop for it. The current time of environmental crisis demands that

we embrace such perspectives, but do so through processes of respectful engagement (Todd, 2016). Most importantly, we need to explore how to foster conditions that support such perspectives and lead to an emergence of a stance of openness, gratitude, and appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life. Cultivating alternate modes of being through friendships and alliances is an important part of strategies for emancipatory social formations (Igoe, 2015).

To summarize, attention on affective relations enables: 1) a different conception of the human – as more-than-rational, open-ended, in the process of becoming; 2) a different understanding of the realm of the ‘social’ and of social processes – not as emerging from individual actions or from structures that enable or constrain individual action but as emergent in the processes that constitute both the individual and the collective but which are reducible to neither (and the collective includes more-than-humans as well); 3) a different conception of nature as socio-natures or as affective ecology animated with affective social-nature relations that co-constitute the social and the natural realms.

While it is now commonplace to talk about socio-natures, the conditions *for the production of* socio-nature relations are typically not critically examined. We need to develop analytical tools that help unravel the process of emergence of socio-nature entanglements and the production of socio-natures. The conceptual resources and insights emerging from the recent affective and ontological turn provide openings for more of this kind of robust theorizing about the commons and about the processes of becoming a commoner. The methodological challenge for us is to find tools to explore affective dimensions. Our traditional tools of analysis that are rooted in an ontological perspective are focused on signification and representational politics; non-representational theory, on the other hand, requires tools that call attention to the ‘onflow’ of everyday life, focus on practices, explore the pre-cognitive realm, and draw from performing arts to reintroduce a ‘sense of wonder’ into the social sciences (Thrift, 2008).

## Conclusions

Reflecting on the future of the commons, David Harvey (2011) notes that our thinking about the commons has been enclosed in a far-too-narrow set of assumptions and caught in the debate about private-property versus state interventions. Ugo Mattei (2012) has similarly emphasized the need to think beyond the state-market duopoly and see the commons and practices of commoning as not only a property rights arrangement but as articulating an alternate set of values. Instead of seeing the commons as a third-way or as an alternative to the state or the market, seeing the commons as affective socio-nature

relations helps to rethink what value *is* and focus on what value we want any governance or property rights arrangement to deliver. In addition to exchange value and use value, it helps to think in terms of what Haraway (2008) terms as 'encounter value' of human and more-than-human encounters. Thinking about the commons in terms of affective relationality, as sites or space of affective encounters and as a set of practices that nurture the subjectivity opens space for other-than-capitalist subjectivities and post-capitalist futures.

I have emphasized the need for a processual understanding of subjectivity and attention to the conditions for subjectivity production. Why are issues of subjectivity important for scholars working on the commons? First, the current ecological crisis is deeply connected with our ways of being human. Second, the solutions that we are seeking to find our way out of this crisis are increasingly market-based and likely to reproduce the subjectivities and modes of being human that have gotten us into this situation in the first place. Third, we need to understand how subjectivities are produced so that we can actively produce alternate subjectivities. Commons scholars can make significant contributions in this regard because the commons are important grounds of producing subjectivity. Relating to a place or a resource as a common calls upon us to act like a commoner and through these actions inculcate subjectivities of being a commoner.

While institutions and 'rules-in-use' play important roles in constituting subjectivity, affects are the medium through which institutions are experienced, interpreted, and reworked. For this reason, analytical attention on institutions needs to be complemented with attention on affects, emotions, and subjectivity. Analytical attention on affects helps unravel conditions of subjectivity formation. As discussed in the paper, it helps us to appreciate that the conditions of subjectivity do not reside solely in an individual or in the environment but are part of the conditions that constitute both but cannot be reduced to either. By analyzing how affects circulate and subjectivity is produced, we may begin to find ways to nurture and expand our 'response-ability' and 'becoming with' the world that we share with many others.

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