

The Circulation of the Common

Nick Dyer-Witheyford

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- 1) This talk is about commons and the possibility of life in common.
- 2) Talk of commons has been, well, common on the left in the last decade. Faced by the onrush of privatizing, deregulating and expropriating global capital, activists and theoreticians in an array of struggles have found in image of the common lands lost to primitive accumulation a point of intellectual and affective inspiration. From land wars in Mexico or India to ‘creative commons’ initiatives of digital culture to attempts to avert chaotic climate change, resistance to the second enclosures of neoliberalism speaks of itself as a defense of the commons.
- 3) This has been important because it provides a way of speaking about collective ownership without invoking a bad history—that is, without immediately conjuring up, and then explaining (away) ‘communism’ conventionally understood as command economy plus a repressive state.
- 4) At the same time, however, commons-politics has its problems. Since 9/11, war has chilled all talk of alternatives to capital. But, in addition, frequent invocation of the commons does not amount to a convincing articulation of such an alternative. It covers a variety of proposals for collective management of various resources, some radical, some reformist, and some, even, reactionary. As George Caffentzis has pointed out, neoliberal capital, confronting the debacle of free market policies, is now turning to a ‘Plan B’, in which limited versions of commons, pollution trading schemes, community development and open-source and file sharing practices are introduced as subordinate aspects of a capitalist economy, where voluntary cooperation subsidizes: Web 0.2 is a paradigm case.
- 5) This paper proposes that, to move beyond this impasse, we add to two concepts already in the theoretical tool box of the movement—the circulation of capital, and the circulation of struggle, a third—the circulation of the common.
- 6) The intention is to think not just what we fight against, or that we are fighting, but what we are fight for--and fight for not just as isolated commons islands in a sea of commodification, but as a world beyond capital, as an emergent commonism.
- 7) So: Marx deemed the cellular form of capitalism to be the commodity, a good produced for exchange between private owners.
- 8) His concept of the circuit of capital traces the metamorphosis of the commodity into money, which commands the acquisition of further resources to be transformed into more commodities. This cycle of capital is expressed in the formulae $M - C - \dots P \dots C' - M'$. Money (M) is used to purchase as commodities (C) labor, machinery and raw materials that are thrown into production (P) to create new commodities (C') that are sold for more money (M'), part of which is retained as profit, part of which is used to purchase more means of production to make more commodities; rinse and repeat.
- 9) The circulation of capital becomes an auto-catalytic, self-generating, boot-strapping process, a “constantly revolving circle” in which every point is simultaneously one of departure and return.” This dynamic is the growth mechanism that converts the cell form of the commodity into what Marx termed more “complex and composite”

forms, an entire capitalist metabolism. It is the path from capital's molecular level to its molar manifestation.

- 10) Within this circuit, Marx identified different kinds of capital—mercantile, industrial and financial. So, for example, the transformation of commodities into money (C-M) is the role of mercantile capital; that of the production of commodities by means of commodities (P) is conducted by industrial capital, and the conversion of money capital into productive capital is the ostensible task of financial capital (M-C).
- 11) The elaborations of this model by other theorists have resulted in diagrams of great entanglement. But if we think of a rotating sphere not only accelerating in velocity as it speeds its circulatory processes but expanding in diameter as it fills more and more social and geographic space, we have the image of global capital.
- 12) It was the discovery of autonomist theory to show that the circulation of capital was also a circulation of struggles. Each moment in the circuit of capital is a potential moment of conflict. Thus the attempt to purchase the commodity labor (M-C) could be interrupted by struggles over dispossession of populations from the land necessary to create disposed proletarians; the moment of production (P) was the site of classic work place resistance; the conversion of C-M was liable to dangers from theft to public reappropriation.
- 13) Each of these flashpoints might ignite others, and then be connected to one another. This de-centered the classic Marxian focus on the immediate point of production, without relinquishing—indeed expanding—the concept of anti-capital struggle. Its view of a widening orbit of potentially interlinked struggles is at the root of the idea—however imperfectly developed-- of the multitude.
- 14) But the theory of the circulation of struggles, in a very classically Marxian way, has little to say about what lay beyond these struggles, about life after capitalism. Precisely because the momentum of the movement of movements is today partially stalled in a war situation, it may be a timely moment to consider this question. Such an exercise can be condemned as utopian thought, but there is such a thing as immanent utopianism, grounded in practical possibilities of the present
- 15) So I postulate another step, from the circulation of struggles to the circulation of the common.
- 16) If the cellular form of capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of society beyond capital is *the common*. A commodity is a good produced for exchange, a common a good produced to be shared. A commodity, a good produced for exchange, presupposes private owners between whom this exchange occurs. The notion of the common presupposes collectivities within which sharing occurs.
- 17) The *circuit of the common* traces how these collectivities—which I term associations—organized shared, common resources including creativity, machinery and resources into productive ensembles that create more commons which in turn provide the basis for new associations.
- 18) So in a rewritten circulation formula, C represents not a Commodity but Commons, and the transformation is not into Money but Association. The basic formula is therefore: $A - C - A'$. This can then be elaborated into $A - C \dots P \dots C' - A'$.
- 19) Just as the circulation of capital subdivides into different types of capital—mercantile, industrial, financial-- we should recognize differing moments in the circuit of the common. Let's call them eco-social, labour and networked commons.

- 20) Eco-social *commons* would be planning institutions to manage the biosphere not as commercial resources but as the shared basis for any continuing form of human association-- agencies for planetary climate control, fishery reserves, protection of watersheds, and prevention of pollution. Naming these eco-social commons indicates that the same planning logic also encompasses epidemiological and public health care provisions, regulation of food chain, biotechnological monitoring understood, again, not as strategic opportunities for commercial exploitation of species life.
- 21) By *labour commons* we mean the democratized organization of productive and reproductive work. This would include worker cooperatives, and co-managed public enterprises, land redistribution. But it should also be conceived more widely to include measures such as the introduction of a planetary basic income or guaranteed wage, conceived not as a glorified welfare hand out, but as an acknowledgement of the contribution to collective productivity of every species life.
- 22) By *networked commons* we mean systems that unleash, rather than repress, the tendency of communication systems to overflow commodified intellectual property regimes in favor of the creation of common pool resources. We are talking an approach to communication that sees in its tendency to create non-rivalrous goods whose reproduction cannot be easily controlled not a problem but a vast potential. We are talking the reduction. We are talking not just of creative commons; but of large scale adoption in public institutions of open source practices; the remuneration of cultural producers in ways that allow the relaxation of commercial IP rights; plus the education and infrastructures that make access to peer to peer systems a public utility as common as the telephone.
- 23) To speak of the circulation of the commons is to propose process in which *eco-social labour and networked commons* each reinforce and enable the other: in which the common goods and services generated by associations at one point in the circuit provide inputs and resources for associations at another.
- 24) So, for example, we can envisage a process in which large scale eco-social planning seeds various labour commons, worker cooperatives and associative enterprises, which then in turn generate the goods and services required for ecological and public health and welfare planning. Amongst these goods and services would be the non-rivalrous software goods of the networked commons, a pool of free knowledge & innovation to be used in turn in the planning and production of the eco-social and labour commons.
- 25) To speak of the circulation of the common is thus to begin to think about how open source and peer to peer models provide a potential reservoir of non-commodified applications for labour cooperatives and associated enterprises, from programming for micro-fabrication tools to inventory control to networked coordination of associations of self-managed enterprises.
- 26) It is also to begin to think of both the equity and eco-social dimensions of highly distributed peer to peer systems, for example in coordinating micro-grid systems of household generated solar and wind energy supply—what Monbiot (2006, 124) terms an ‘energy Internet’; or of the role in public planning of grid computing projects-- projects where millions of people make available the unused screen saver cycles to measure global warming. It is ultimately to think how highly distributed

- 27) To speak of the circulation of the common is also to think both how large scale molar governmental planning creates the conditions for autonomous projects—by funding coops or adopting open source and peer to peer standards-- and, in turn, how these autonomous molecular units in turn guaranteed innovation, variegated input and dissent against the dangers of bureaucratization, rigidity, and sectional interest.
- 28) ‘Commonism’ would thus be a social order assembled from a connection or circulation of different commons, preventing the capitalist cooption and subsumption of current and new commons by linking them up, attaining a critical mass that counters the weight of established relations. Such a project need not predicate an instant abolition of the market, only the transformation from central system to a sub-system, surrounded by, and subordinated to a more powerful ‘commons’ dynamics. It process of what Christopher Spher describes as ‘out-cooperating Empire.’
- 29) This is speculative, but not, however, entirely one of those abstract cook-books for the future the Marxian left so rightly distrusts. Where one can see elements of this type of project in action is in some of the ‘solidarity economics’ of the Latin American left. Here we see models of a twenty first century socialism that works on the basis of a ‘quilt’ or ‘patchwork’ of decommmodified activity includes interaction between central state planning and a decentralized network of worker cooperatives, self-management projects, nuclei of development, and so on. In the work of solidarity economists such as Euclides Mance, the units of these networks are conceived not just as individually following principles of social and environmental justice, but as providing inputs for each other, to create an autopoietic, self-boosting system whose logic is similar to that outlined here. What is being increasingly thrown into the mix in Venezuela, Brazil is now publically sponsored use of open source systems—networked commons. So the recipes are being tested.
- 30) Let me now very quickly draw out some of the implications of this way of thinking. First, it is against the grain of postmodern thought in so far as it proposes a model of a totality, counter-totality against capital.
- 31) Second, however, it starts small. By moving from a cellular model of commons and association that is simple, even rudimentary, this paper has aimed to suggest a process thinkable at levels from the domestic to municipal to the planetary and implementable at both modest and large levels. It scales.
- 32) Third, it suggests a multiplicitous totality. Speaking of a complex, composite non-capitalist society composed by an interaction of different kinds of commons—eco-social, labour, networked— each with distinct, specific logics, we can wake from the hallucination both of a uniform socialist utopia, and of a capitalism to which there is no alternative, in favor of a new potential assembled from multiple forms of common logic.
- 33) Fourth, this is not necessarily a model of changing the world without seizing power. It does not preclude a punctual moment or moments of radical crisis. It simply suggests that the circulation of the commons have to precede such a moment, to establish its preconditions, and extend beyond it, to actualize its potential.
- 34) As circulation of struggles arises from the circulation of capital, so the circulation of the commons arises from the circulation of struggle. Fights for commons--terrestrial, planned and networked-- are happening, now, even in the teeth of mounting war danger. Commonism is a forward projection of these contests. It is an emergency

concept – a concept of emergence. If capital is an immense heap of commodities, commonism will be a multiplication of commons. Under such conditions it may be possible once again to say: “*Omnia sunt communia*”—everything in common.