

From Communism to Commonism

Massimo De Angelis in conversation with Harald Trapp and Robert Thum

Harald Trapp / Robert Thum: *Massimo De Angelis, as a professor of political economy and an expert in commons and commoning, what is your relationship to Karl Marx and his theories?*

Massimo De Angelis: My very first encounter with Marx was in the 1970s in Italy when, walking down the street aged fourteen or fifteen, I saw these huge banners with his portrait. Later on, as students, we self-organized study groups of his theories together with workers in nearby factories. When I went to university I considered myself a Marxist and when I studied political sciences, of course, I saw Marx everywhere. Then I went on to study economics at the University of Utah. They had a radical program in which Marx was reduced to a political economy rather than a critique of political economy.

I embrace the broader perspective on Marx called “Autonomist Marxism,” which understands the categories of his work as categories of class struggle that take many forms in many moments in history, and in different circumstances. Fundamentally, it’s the situation we are still living in today. So, my relationship with Marx is that, without Marx, I would not been able to write about the commons as I write today.

Is it correct to say that you evolved from a communist into a commonist?

The relation between the two terms is very close. I wouldn’t make much distinction, but it is important to articulate the two. For Marx, communism was summarized in a couple of sentences in his own opus. One sentence comes very early on in his work *The German Ideology*, which he wrote, in some parts, together with Friedrich Engels. In these writings communism is not an ideal. It is not a system of rules to be imposed or a model; instead, it is “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.”¹

Another way to understand communism for Marx is summarized in the idea of the association of free producers. What does “association of free producers” mean? It means that producers, whoever they are, not just factory workers but university lecturers, students, care workers, nurses, or teachers, are free. They are free to associate, to decide the what, the how, and the how much of production.

Finally, another great statement about communism by Marx is that famous sentence in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, according to which on the flag of the future society there would be written: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”²

If you take all these sentences, which are statements of what communism is for him, and if you study the commons that are those social systems—in which people take things in their own hands, to meet needs, to give rise to aspirations and do things together—you realize that when people come together and emphasize horizontality, they emphasize deep democracy, a deep participative democracy in the way they organize themselves, which is very close to the principles of Marx. So, for me, the answer to “what is the difference between communism and commonism?” is—at this level—not much.

Of course we live in a time in which the word communism has been dirtied by historical experience; it has been dirtied by the Gulags; it has been dirtied by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that spoke in the name of communism. In the consciousness of many people the word is still associated with that negativity. It is a dangerous word. So for me “co-mm-o-n-ism” is just a way to say that it is different from communism.

Marx speaks about the enclosure of land as the beginning of the process of primitive accumulation, which preceded the process of capitalist accumulation. What is the relationship between capital and the enclosures? And why is it still relevant today in the context of commoning?

That is a huge question. The enclosures bring us back to the origins of modern capitalism. The origin of modern capitalism was the expropriation of land from the peasantry of Europe, especially in England. English capitalism began with the historical process known as “the enclosures,” when the landed gentry took away common land that farmers used for their subsistence. They took it away in order to valorize it capitalistically, to raise sheep and make money out of it. The enclosures—it is important to remind ourselves—are not interesting because they are something that happened in the past, but because enclosure, or what Marx refers to as “primitive” or “original accumulation,” is a recurrent aspect of capitalist development. It still happens today.

For the small peasantry in England in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, common land was a means of subsistence. The commons in those times were fundamental elements for people’s reproduction, and this was not only the case in Britain, but also all around the world. By taking away that means of subsistence peasants were not left

with enough to survive and they were forced implicitly to either migrate, rob the gentry or rebel. Those were the three options they had in spite of contradictory laws by Henry VI or Henry VIII to prevent them from moving, for example. But migration was a mass phenomenon.

Marx has shown how, historically, primitive accumulation was a precondition of capitalist development. This process created on the one hand the modern proletariat, with a high dependence on the wage for its reproduction, and on the other the accumulation of capital necessary to fuel the industrial revolution. From the 1980s onwards, the profound limitations of this interpretation became obvious. Neoliberalism was rampaging around the world as an instrument of global capital. Structural adjustment policies, imposed by the IMF [International Monetary Fund], were promoting enclosures of commons everywhere: from community land and water resources to entitlements, to welfare benefits and education. These processes are pretty much the same today all over the world. Today, the massive wave of land grabs in Africa by multinational corporations is exactly the same thing.

This process of enclosures of commons is an ongoing phenomenon. In reverse this also means that the production and reproduction of commons are an ongoing process. People again and again try to create and access resources in a way that is different from the modalities of the market, which is the standard way for capital to access resources. Take for example the peer-to-peer production happening in cyberspace. The process of the formations of commons is ongoing. The commons are also a social force that recurs in history and, if developed to a certain extent, can contrast capital.

Is commoning a more rural than urban phenomenon? You say that the state is more present in the metropolis than in rural areas.

The state exists in the condition of the rural village but it is far more distant. You do not feel the control of the state so closely. In part, this is because there is still a network of solidarity, an informal network of solidarity among neighbors, or, if you are part of a clan, a series of relatives, or an extended family.

The condition of the city is more isolating for us, but commoning also exists in the city. We are witnessing an incredible urban movement that reclaims commoning and turns it into a social form for change. When I am talking about commoning as a verb, it is a verb that, as the historian Peter Linebaugh discovered, was used at the time of the commons in England before the enclosure. When the commoners wanted to go onto the land—perhaps to collect

wood, and doing so together—they went to common. They did not go to work. They went to common, which is of course a labor activity because you cut the trees. You may decide together, which trees to cut, but it's still a labor activity, which is organically linked to nature, and to the needs of nature, and to the needs of the community.

That commoning, that doing common in a horizontal way—in a participatory way—also exists in the cities. There are many examples: in Spain we have an amazing movement, a housing movement called PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca) that reclaims houses from the banks in compensation for what the state paid to the banks in order to rescue them from the crisis. They reclaim these houses and organize their own reproduction in there. The incumbent mayor of Barcelona comes from that movement. As a movement of commoning it has generated a political alternative, or at least a sense of political alternative.

One example of a completely different way of commoning, but a very effective one, is the self-organization of consumers and producers I described in my latest book. Small food producers come together in self-organized markets in the city to negotiate, and often fight with, local authorities to have the right to create their own organic label and avoid having to pay money to the state for an organic label. In fact the division between producers and consumers is transcended. It is overcome because consumers and producers participate together in market assemblies to define prices and to define quality—to define who is in and who is out. This is a completely different model to a supermarket, where the consumers are those who come in and pay and the producers are some distant people around the world who provide the food that we eat.

So commoning processes involve individuals, subjects. There is something that Foucault calls the production of subjectivity. What would the subject of the commons be?

The subject of the commons would be a commoner. A commoner is someone who definitely aspires to freedom, which is different to the freedom we aspire to as consumers.

Could you say more about your definition of freedom?

When we act as consumers, as Milton Friedman reminded us back in the early eighties, we are free to choose. That is freedom in the neoliberal paradigm. We are free to choose between this phone and that phone; or between this apple and that apple; or between different items in a

large basket of goods. Although freedom of choice is subject to budget constraints, which are given to us by our relative position within the market. Our freedom is confined into a market choice. What this market chooses to give to us, the menu that is presented to us, is like the one at a restaurant. You are free to choose whatever is on the menu. But who chooses the menu?

I think that the commoner's freedom is not only an individual freedom, but it is a collective freedom to decide what is on the menu. Meaning: how do we produce what we produce? What do we produce? When do we produce? How much work do we have to put in in order to produce? How many resources do we want to use to produce a particular object? The freedom of the commoner is a freedom that involves all sorts of decisions, complex decisions that are linked to a particular production or reproduction.

When we do this, it is not only in order to maximize our utility or our profit, but also in view of our own resilience and the sustainability of the environment and the ecological system. That is the fundamental difference between the two different freedoms; it is important to underline that the commonist paradigm is for freedom. Of course, if the word "freedom" is left unqualified, it becomes an empty word. We have to qualify it in this way: "we want to be free to decide everything at stake in our lives and do it together."

At the same time you also speak about the need for regulations. There was a famous discussion in economic science about the problem of free access ...

The problem of free access goes back to Garrett Hardin, who wrote a paper in 1968 called *The Tragedy of the Commons*.³ Hardin presents a parable of a few farmers who share common land and on this common land each has their own animals that need to graze. Hardin's argument is that if each farmer maximizes their own utility, they will all bring as many animals as possible onto that common land, whether sheep or cows. Why? Because that pasture is free for all of them. Each of them has an interest in increasing their stock, to make it bigger and grow faster.

But Elinor Ostrom made the point that this is not a tragedy of the commons. The commons have rules that are set by the commoners. That association of individuals will come together and decide rules of access. This is what is happening around the world because people know that if everybody just follows their own self-interest, the resources will be depleted. This results in an interesting problem: what is the relation between free access and the commons? The commons are systems in which the access to a resource, in this case land, is regulated by the commoners who set specific rules. It happens everywhere, like in Maine in

the United States, where lobster-fishing communities have learned to do exactly that to regulate their own self-interest, otherwise the lobster catch would be depleted. And they learned that through history, through experience. The problem is to understand that free access, in order to exist, has to be part of a commons. That means also that work is necessary for the reproduction of free access.

The production and reproduction of commons are, by definition, self-organizing processes. You say that both the state and capital will always have a parasitic relationship with the commons. Is there no possible way of integrating capital or the state into the idea of the commons?

I wouldn't want to integrate capital. Absolutely not! Why? Because the logic of capital is fundamentally a logic of growth for growth's sake. I would be extremely alarmed if capital was integrated, as it always tries to use the commons.

Concerning the state, I would be very skeptical, but I have an open mind in this sense that the state uses this discursive fiction, which is the fiction of democracy. I am a democrat. I want democracy. In my opinion, to the extent that the state is deeply democratized and detached from capital—that is: the extent to which the state is transformed into something else—the state can become an element of the commons ecology. But this is something that we may not call “state” anymore, as I brought up earlier in the Marxian term of the association of free producers, it is a higher scale regulation. It depends what we are aiming at. If we are aiming at a world of disconnected eco-communities then we don't want the state. If we want a world where there are autonomous communities of different sizes as well as different institutions, but we also want regulations that include them all together, then we might need something: a new paradigm of the state.

Here in London, capital is very present, even more than the state. What could a London defined by commoning and the commons look like? Would there still be private property?

We are speculating here, but let us assume that there are ongoing waves of commons movements. Maybe brought on by great crisis or maybe because suddenly people do not want the life they are living now anymore. What would happen? Well, one answer would be that in complexity-theory you cannot imagine the future. The future will emerge. That would be the fair answer to give you.

On the other hand, the temptation to build scenarios exists. So scenario one could be: the City of London and the elites will use all their money to repress commoning and turn everything into a fortress world. It is a scenario that you see in many cities around the world: the gated communities. But you could also have the collapse of the institutions. You could have capital that would migrate somewhere else, where there is still some stronghold for capital.

Scenario two: the Detroit effect. Detroit was the metropolis of the automobile industry. What happened in Detroit? Detroit imploded at the very moment the automobile industry disappeared, or was reduced enormously. What happened is that large areas around Detroit have been taken over by the communities who were facing a food desert, with no supermarkets anymore. The old structure that took care of their basic reproduction in exchange for money disappeared, leaving a lot of empty space, which they occupied in a communal way. And they occupied it for what? Initially, for producing food. Out of that a network of reproduction developed.

In short, a new paradigm would rise, which in the first place would re-territorialize the management of reproduction needs: food, education, care. It would empower communities to do that in full autonomy. And then different regions around Europe could collaborate, share knowledge, share technologies, share priorities for the future.

Could you describe the mode of operation that uniquely defines the dynamics of commons?

That is the notion of autonomy. Commoning—the doing in common—is the force that reproduces the commons. Commoning is to find the rules together. It is a very complex activity articulated in many ways. By “doing in common” I mean: doing things together without an external agent from the top telling us what to do. We are taking things into our own hands. That is autonomy. A practical element of autonomy that doesn’t exist in all the commons is autopoiesis. I encountered the notion of autopoiesis in Luhmann’s writings, but then I went back to Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, especially to Varela, who wrote a very important essay on autopoiesis in the early 1980s. Autopoiesis, according to Varela, is when a particular system reproduces not only the relations among its components, but the components themselves. The autopoiesis or auto-production implies the production and reproduction of the components of that system. That is fundamental.

If commons are autonomous, what is the relation of the commoners to society at large?

The commons are not totally, but principally, isolated from the environment. Although the outside often mediates what the commoners do, there is a large sphere of autonomy. The commoners set their own rules. After studying thousands of commons, Ostrom distilled principles—not because she believed they are right—that are necessary for having commons to reproduce and to sustain themselves. According to her, if those principles are met, including transparency and horizontal monitoring, the commons will work.

If we believe Ostrom, there are tools that make commons long-term phenomena. But we do not want only small groups of people coming together and doing their thing. What we want is to transform society. That is the difference between my work and that of many other people writing on commons. I do valorize small commons and all the efforts they make to reproduce part of their lives autonomously, but, on the other hand, we want to push for bigger, more complex forms and change the world.

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845), 57.

² Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) (Cabin John, MD: Wildside Press 2008), 27.

³ Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162, No. 3859 (December 13, 1968): 1243–1248.