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# Land as a Commons: examples from the UK and Italy

Chris Maughan and Tomaso Ferrando

## Abstract

This chapter focuses on contemporary forms of mobilization that apply the paradigm of the commons to land and soil as key components in the creation of an ecological and democratic food system. We start by constructing a framework which acknowledges this diverse field of action, from the regime-oriented, through the reformist, to the most radical of proponents. Secondly, we engage with some examples that we know best to present the reality on the ground in the United Kingdom and in Italy. Those examples combine the struggles for land as a commons with some of the most important struggles for democratic, just and ecological food systems. As we discuss, civil-society-led processes may thus provide important connective tissue between the radical outliers of food commoning and broad-based support for food systems which nourish the collective, rather than enriching the few. The pattern of commoning is long, but it has to begin from the very beginning: with land and soil.

## 1. Land at the root of the food system

We assume that if you chose to read this book it is because you share with us the idea that the fundamentals of the contemporary food system must be rethought. Food poverty, non-communicable diseases, environmental degradation, social injustice and resource depletion are only few of the visible consequences of a food system intended to produce and distribute food, not on the basis of needs and rights, but on the demands of the market.

For such fundamentalist market logic to prevail, food must be defined and treated like a commodity, no differently than a mobile phone or crude oil. In an era of ubiquitous online purchasing and the 24-hour drive-through, it is even easier for food to be thought of this way, divorced from its social and ecological contexts. When food is commodified, David Harvey reminds us (2003), the complexity of social and productive relationships becomes hidden - a fetish is created that covers the imbalances of power on which such processes rely, as well as their negative ecological impacts.

The shift from food as a commodity to food as a commons that is advocated in this book, we argue, must thus begin with the mapping and identification of those struggles and political choices that are hidden behind the act of consumption. Of all the elements, from labour to seeds, from water to the means of production, we believe that particular attention must be paid to the de-commodification of the land and the soil that make food possible. In other words, we believe that there cannot be a true *commoning* of the food system as long as land (and water and all the other elements that are essential to the generation of food) continue to be defined through the prism of absolute proprietary regimes. Indeed, the political choices around the allocation of rights and limits concerning land and its fertility lie at the core of any society, not only of its food

system, and a transformation of the latter requires a reconfiguration of what land is, and the role that it plays in social and ecological reproduction.

Much of this will be familiar to readers with a basic understanding of the commons and its histories. Indeed, the enclosure of agricultural lands is often identified as the basis on which modernity and the western economic system were created (Wallerstein, 1974; Arrighi, 1998). The land of First Nations in North America; the commons in the United Kingdom; the forests and pastoral land communally managed throughout the Global South: all have been seized and fenced, subordinated to the logic of private ownership, capital accumulation and economic growth. Once agricultural land is reduced to its exchange value, it is also easily stripped of its social and cultural meanings, that are context-specific and epistemically determined (Diaz et al., 2018). Its living complexity is simplified into to a substrate upon which to build limitless private wealth, insensible to any resultant damage to the social and ecological fabric. Land becomes a homogeneous, standardized, and objectified *asset* (Scott, 1999).<sup>i</sup> Any attempt to change the mainstream food system in line with the ecological and justice concerns must therefore begin with recognising land and soil as a common resource, one that must be collectively, sustainably, and democratically managed, generating benefits that are accessible and shared, especially among those most in need.

In dealing with land as a commons for a commons-based food system, this chapter does not engage substantially with the history of enclosures, nor with the long history of resistance to such activities. Rather, we decided to focus on contemporary forms of mobilization that combine the idea of the commons with land and soil as key components in the creation of an ecological and democratic food system. However, given the space constraints and the abundance of examples from all over the world, we had to make a decision based on our intellectual interest and our geographical backgrounds. Firstly, we constructed our contribution around the idea that the commons most certainly continues to be an issue of great political significance, but not without its contradictions and inconsistencies. Following Laforge et al. (2016), we thus offer a framework which acknowledges this diverse field of action, from the regime-oriented (or ‘dominant’), through the reformist, to the most radical of proponents. Secondly, as two citizens of the Global North who are involved in local movements in our own geographies, we considered it appropriate to speak about those examples and realities that we know best. This is not intended to diminish the many stories of land struggles and resistance in the name of the commons originating from the Global South. We hope the reader will not dismiss our choice as mere academic Eurocentrism; on the contrary, we hope you will be curious to know more about the struggles for land and the commons that are taking place at ‘the core’ of the global capitalist project.

With this in mind, Section II introduces a range of examples of ‘food commoning’ in the United Kingdom, including those that provide evidence of the effort to ‘co-opt’ the power of the commons and contain any political fallout that might arise from this; those that we call ‘collaborators’ or reformists, i.e. those attempting to find a space of compromise within the circuits of capitalism, to carve out a legitimate niche within the enclosure; and finally, those groups who position themselves in a stance of ‘contestation’ with mainstream food regimes, calling for a radical overhaul of the current system. Section III moves to Italy and examines the case of ‘Mondeggi as a Common Farm without Masters’ to offer another case of ‘contestation’.

This example reflects on the possibility of linking the theory and practice of the commons with the struggle for land and food sovereignty (Borras et al., 2015) and imagining a post-capitalist property regime where public, private and common coexist (Ireland and Meng, 2017). By way of conclusion, we offer a reflexive appeal for all who read this to engage directly with these rare and ephemeral examples of the commons - to learn from and join those currently fighting to build and sustain such spaces, and ensure that stories and actions of commoning continue to be told and experienced.

## **2. Commoning at the heart of the enclosures: co-optation, collaboration and contestation.**

From one perspective, it is a miracle that ‘the commons’ has any political currency in the UK at all. As the title of this subsection indicates, Britain constituted the epicenter of the capitalist accumulation project. From Thomas More’s (2016 [1516]) disquieting account of sheep that ‘devastate and depopulate fields [...leaving] no land free for the plough’, to Wallenstein’s unflinchingly detailed World-System volumes (1974), the annals of British enclosure offer a grim, 700-year cavalcade of misery<sup>ii</sup>. And that’s not all; history has not been kind to the commons as a concept – whether brutally (but unfairly) disavowed in the now infamous ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ (Hardin, 1968), or expertly unravelled by the brilliant Shared Assets (2015), to many ‘the commons’ has become a problematic term at best – it never really worked, or even existed at all, and it never will. But if you look to the grassroots today, the opposite is irrefutable. The commons has, against all odds, retained the power of a clarion call, capable of rallying the vestiges of an ancient agrarian struggle for land justice, keeping alive a vision of food and farming for the many, not the few.

The most recent chapter in the 700-year history of the erosion of common land in the UK has been the much-documented disappearance of public spaces (Grolle, 2008). In food growing terms, this has been seen most extensively in the loss of municipal allotments, which have fallen by more than 75% since the 1950s (NWCAA, 2017). In this context, one might welcome any effort to halt this trend and (re)-open any and all spaces for publicly accessible, community food growing purposes. Indeed, recent years have seen an unprecedented spike of interest in the development of various forms of community food production, such as community supported agriculture (CSAs), community gardens, and *guerilla* gardening (Guitart et al., 2012; Tornaghi, 2016).

Increasingly, and in the terms of Laforge et al. (2016), this popularity has also inevitably been the target of ‘co-optation’, in many instances creating insidiously negative outcomes for the communities purported to benefit from their implementation. This confounding phenomenon has even coined a delightful neologism: ‘Green LULUs’; that is, ‘locally unwanted land uses’. Evidence is emerging that the placement of green infrastructures (such as community gardens), far from being desired by, or of obvious benefit to, proximate low-income residents, can have the adverse effect of increasing rents in surrounding areas (i.e. ‘gentrifying’ them), pushing out working class, or otherwise low-income communities who have historically resided there. Research done in this area has consistently emphasised the deleterious role played by corporate backers of such Green LULUs, particularly where decision-making around their placement and implementation is taken out of the hands of local residents (Angelovski et al., 2017).

A recent example in the UK is the ‘Bags of Help’ project run by Tesco supermarket. The scheme, intended to fund community projects (many of which have a food-growing focus), rather predictably selected projects based on their proximity to Tesco stores, and awarded its grants on condition of strict adherence to ‘acknowledge [...] the support of Tesco in any published documents’ (Groundwork, 2017). As such, the scheme is clearly not only run-of-the-mill ‘green wash’, but also a fairly elaborate extension of Tesco’s marketing strategy, complete with ‘signposting’ to the nearest outlet. The argument here is not that the ‘Bags of Help’ scheme is particularly inimical – such behaviour is, unfortunately, only to be expected from a corporate mainstay like Tesco – instead, the point to grasp here is that community or ‘commons’ represents spaces and processes that are being steadily appropriated, and that their transformative potential will only work if they are truly designed and determined by the communities who use them. ‘Bags for Help’ is first and foremost about Tesco, not the enrichment of civic and communal cultures, ecological food alternatives, or collective assets.

The jury is still out on the impact (negative or otherwise) of Tesco’s ‘Bags of Help’ scheme (at time of writing, the project is only part way through its second round of awards), but it is undeniably problematic to have community initiatives determined not by local needs but, ultimately, by the marketing strategy of a corporate superpower. Indeed, put this way, who can ignore the existential threat Tesco and its global supply chains pose to attempts to reclaim and develop food commons? In what ways, we must ask, are the political potentialities of such community schemes being distorted and subverted by their supposed benefactors? Such counterfactuals are, sadly, almost impossible to determine.

Thankfully, in the UK at least, such corporate co-optation of food communities and food commons is relatively unusual (for another example, however, see the Heineken Orchard Blossom<sup>iii</sup>). Much more well-known are attempts by organisations to ‘play the game’ of private ownership in order to create commons-like spaces where food and food-related knowledges can be influenced by, and be of benefit to, the majority. Over the last two decades a number of such initiatives have emerged using a variety of community-based platforms. CSAs are perhaps the most prominent (Urgenci, 2016), but also land trusts (like the Kindling Trust in Manchester and the Bristol Land Trust), cooperatives (such as the Ecological Land Cooperative or Organic Lea), knowledge sharing platforms (like Farm Hack and Soil Hack), and innovative right to food activism (like The Real Junk Food Project), all in an effort to establish legal grounds on which to redistribute land, food, and agroecological knowledge, and build a food system around a decommoditized and commoning paradigm.

Perhaps the most widely publicised example of such ‘collaborative’ food commoning is ‘Incredible Edible’ (IET), based out of Todmorden in Yorkshire, which aims to convert public assets, especially ornamental flowerbeds, into food-producing spaces. IET boasts many things, including a rapidly expanding network of affiliated projects (over 100 in the UK and more than 700 worldwide (Peart, 2015)) beneficial impacts on wildlife, increases in healthy eating practices, community cohesion, and flourishing local food economies (IET, 2017b). IET is notable for its use of radical language, such as its deliberately playful neologism for guerrilla gardening – ‘propaganda gardening’. IET’s aim is nakedly to ‘revolutionise local food systems’ through the ‘power of small actions’ (Russi, 2015) and explicit about its intention to ‘repurpos[e] the commons for open source food and agricultural biodiversity’ (Paull, 2013). IET has been

singularly successful (in the UK at least) in reinvigorating and exporting an idea of the urban food commons in which ‘there is something for everyone’ (IET, 2017a).

That said, IET’s collaborative or ‘big tent’ approach (see McMichael, 2008) often means that it treads a difficult line between its radical objectives and some of its more mainstream collaborative aspirations. Indeed, certain of IET’s actions might appear incongruous in the context of an explicit attempt to revolutionise and re-democratise local food systems. Most famously perhaps is the instance of the repurposing of a flower bed outside the town police station, which on the surface looked like a daringly subversive act of guerrilla gardening, but which was in fact welcomed by local police, to the great delight of IET. A similar level of incongruity is achieved by IET’s focus on tourism and local enterprise. Tourism is pushed particularly hard by IET, who declare triumphantly (and with tongue firmly in cheek) ‘Welcome to Todmorden: the only town in Britain to attract vegetable tourists’ (IET website 2017). Again, this is not a ‘gotcha’ point intended to undermine the success of IET; IET has been successful where many others have failed in popularising the idea of community-led urban food growing. It is simply to point out that IET’s strategy is one circumscribed by the logic of private capital, not one which seeks to directly dismantle it and organize society around different axes. Indeed, it begs the question, what would food commoning look like if it did take seriously systemic change, particularly a movement away from the capitalist-logic of contemporary food systems?

Radical or ‘contesting’ models of food commoning still remain a relatively fringe phenomenon in the UK; that said, they often punch well above their weight, being routinely led by small, committed groups of activists able to gain traction by exposing the fatal logic of modern land ownership and food production. The examples below are thus united by their preparedness not only to create (or ‘reclaim’) commons-like spaces where food and food-related knowledge sharing can be influenced by, and be of benefit to, all (as with previous examples), but to signal a preparedness to risk direct confrontation (and sometimes arrest and imprisonment) to achieve those ends. This preparedness is not, it must be stressed, an unthinking opposition, but rather a necessary consequence of the deeply ingrained injustices of the contemporary food system, and the need to take decisive action to construct alternatives.

Land occupations have a long history in the UK, often in response to spikes in acts of enclosure and appropriation. In more recent years, perhaps the best-known examples are the road protests of the late 80s and early 90s, the successes of which have been well-documented (Plows, 2008). One less well-discussed outcome of these protests, however, was the influence such actions had on food-focused land protests of the following decades. The influence, for example, on Reclaim the Fields, Grow Heathrow, Yorkley Court, and anti-fracking protests in West Sussex, North Yorkshire and Lancashire during the 2010s, can be directly connected to these earlier struggles. A key moment in the contemporary radical food commoning movement was undoubtedly Grow Heathrow, a land occupation in the outskirts of west London. Though the explicit purpose of this occupation was (and remains) to prevent the development of a third runway at Heathrow, the group also signalled the role of food, not only in their name, but also by declaring their aim ‘to develop and promote community and resource autonomy to support long-term community resilience’ (Transition Heathrow, 2017).

The site Grow Heathrow chose to occupy – a piece of semi-derelict land – was also once used to cultivate exotic fruit for sale in London, before such production was outsourced to the developing world and transnational commodity traders (Patel, 2007). This (un)happy coincidence allowed Grow Heathrow occupiers to immediately begin growing food in the tumbledown skeletons of the old polytunnels that remained on site, in a pointed opposition to the neo-colonial logic of the modern industrial food system. Added to this, Grow Heathrow have worked hard to foster a culture of continuous communal living on the site by organising regular events, especially those based around the sharing of food either grown locally, foraged, or salvaged from the local urban waste stream. Grow Heathrow offer a ‘live’ example of a community based around the values of social justice, environmental sustainability, and frugal abundance.

The success of Grow Heathrow is unprecedented; in March 2018 they will enter their 9th year of continuous occupation; and yet, Grow’s success can be seen not only in their enduring presence and numerous positive impacts on the local area (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013), but also in their function as a hub or catalyst for other forms of food commons activism. Reclaim the Fields (est. 2011), Yorkley Court Community Farm (2012-2016), and later the Land Justice Network (previously ‘Land for What?’ est. 2016) have all directly interacted with the site. Over the last eight years, Grow Heathrow has used their space to convene an ambitiously wide range of political ‘issues’, from resource scarcity, democratic governance, climate change, sustainable food systems, and housing shortages (to name but a few intersections). Indeed, if IET has ‘something for everyone’, Grow Heathrow might be said to offer *radical action for everyone*, with food and land at the centre of a just and ecological reorganization of British social and political life.

Another site of note is, of course, Yorkley Court (YCCF) itself, which was an occupation of a farm ‘where the land ownership is contested and where the soil is abused by industrial agriculture’ (Reclaim the Fields, n.d.). YCCF’s vision was to cultivate the land ‘according to the principles of agroecology in any aspect of managing of the land and the principles of Food Sovereignty when deciding upon the future development of the farm’ (YCCF, 2015). As justification for their actions Yorkley Court cited the ‘1000 years of struggle’ over which period ‘the ownership of fields, forest and commons has been progressively concentrated into the hands of a few powerful landowners’ (ibid).

Though Yorkley Court occupation was eventually ended in March 2016, along with Grow Heathrow (and other intentional and public-facing land projects too many to mention here) their mere existence continues to fuel ongoing food commons activism in the UK, and beyond. Of particular note in recent years has been the development of the Land Justice Network (LJN) whose focus on the commons is explicit. In their manifesto, ‘Our Common Ground’, LJN state that ‘Land is the main uniting factor underpinning most of our struggles for social and environmental justice, whether for genuinely affordable housing or food growing, for preserving nature or community space’ (LJN, 2017). Indeed, what makes LJN so exciting is their retention of a radical, ‘contesting’ programme within a ‘big tent’ frame. To have the Landworkers’ Alliance, The Radical Housing Network, The New Economics Foundation, and Just Space all around the same table is exhilarating, and a sign of the enduring and broad appeal of radical land reform and the commons.

The next few years promise to be an exciting time for a grassroots contestation, re-construction, and re-articulation of what Eleanor Ostrom (2007) called a ‘new commons’; that is, working out where the soil, land, and food production fit within a dizzying constellation of emergent commons (especially digital and knowledge-related). In a time of unprecedented social and environmental challenges, it will be these new spaces (not a revivalist commons based on a medieval fantasy) which will provide space for robust networks of solidarity to develop, vital in the ongoing fight for social and ecological justice.

### **3. Regaining and redistributing control: Mondéggi Bene Comune – Farm without Masters**

Moving our attention to Italy, the story of land as a commons can be tracked back to 2011, a schizophrenic year for the Italian commons. In June, more than seventeen million citizens voted to support the idea of water as a common good (*Acqua bene commune*) and defeated the legislative attempt to further privatize this essential resource (Carrozza and Fantini, 2013; Mattei and Quarta, 2014). The referendum represented the political and legal victory of hundreds of local water committees and a thousand testimonies that water is an essential element of life and cannot be appropriated by the few. It was a moment of rediscovery of the commons and great debate, with the multiplication of platforms for intellectual engagement and spaces of practical action (Quarta and Ferrando, 2015). However, in less than six months the country was dragged into the direst phase of post-crisis austerity and commodification. Under the government of Prime Minister Mario Monti (a former Goldman Sachs and EU competition commissioner) the rhetoric of guilt, urgency, catastrophe and inevitability was translated into market-based solutions, cuts in public expenditures and large-scale privatization.

As with the historical enclosure of the British commons, law became the tool to impose a socio-economic transformation through privatization and exclusion. The combination of public authority and the rhetoric of the state of emergency of public finances (Agamben, 2003) legitimized the implementation of a radical (i.e. going to the roots) bio-political project of socio-economic discipline. The separation between the Italian government and the people could not be stronger. On the one hand, common-sense was undergoing a powerful re-construction from the bottom-up with a referendum attended by more than seventeen million people. On the other hand, the executive was inflicting on the country a new round of the neoliberal shock doctrine (Klein, 2009). As the name of the decree suggests (*Decreto Salva Italia*, i.e. Save Italy), the legal measure was introduced with urgency as an exceptional intervention justified by the context of international crisis and the need to find assets that could be sold and contribute to the financial stability of the public balance. In a reprise of the *‘There Is No Alternative’* (TINA) mantra of the ‘80s, the decree raised the retirement age, reduced the budget of the national health system and public transportation and used public guarantees to save private banks (Art. 8). Public land was specifically addressed by Article 66, which institutionalized the sale of public agricultural land to generate income and revitalise the national agri-food sector.

Although Article 66 also contained a clause designed to support farmers under the age of 35, it did not take long before the movements that had challenged the privatization of water recognized the very essence of the decree: privatize public land not for the many but to support businesses and entrepreneurs with enough capital to afford it. The response was immediate and was framed in the terms of the commons. On the ground, local and national movements concerned by the access to land joined forces with those campaigning around water as a commons, and launched



the “*Campagna Terra Bene Comune*” (Campaign for Land as a Commons) to oppose the decree. Similar to the water campaign that had preceded the referendum, the language of the commons was used to build a framework for resistance and bottom-up contestation that was sufficiently broad to welcome people and organizations with diverse backgrounds and trajectories. Given the silence from the public administration and the urgency of the situation, it did not take long before local collectives decided to assume a proactive attitude and, on the wave of the occupations of private and public urban spaces that had taken place in the last years in Italy, begin occupations of their own.

As in the UK, radical or ‘contesting’ models of food commoning are a relatively fringe phenomenon in Italy. However, their theoretical and practical relevance is increasing, and their experiences are particularly interesting from the point of view of interconnecting struggles and bottom-up construction of post-capitalist proprietary forms. Of all the experiences that emerged from the *Terra Bene Comune* moment, we decided to introduce the example of *Mondeggi Bene Comune* (‘Mondeggi as a Commons - Farm Without Master’) and its legal and political implications. However, we are aware that several realities have emerged in connection with *Campi Aperti* (Open Fields) and *Genuino Clandestino* (Genuine Clandestine), two national networks that developed a national profile and that have provided the intellectual and material context in which the struggle for land in Italy has been unfolding (Angrisi, 2011).

The reasons why we chose to examine the case of Mondeggi are three-fold: first of all, Mondeggi has prioritised combining the struggle for land with the construction of a just, democratic, and ecological food system. Secondly, the commoners have been practicing the idea of land as a commons by constructing a form of property that is based both on the static idea of property over something (land, means of production, some animals) and the dynamic notion of communal land management (commoning the land as a way of living on the land in community, and sharing, caring, and producing for more than mere individual return).<sup>iv</sup> Thirdly, one of the authors had the opportunity to visit the farm, meet some of the Mondeggi commoners and spend time listening to their stories, hopes and concerns. It was a unique opportunity to learn about the complexity of commoning the land.

This experience has raised multiple questions that cannot be fully addressed here, and that are linked with the multidimensional nature of the project, which is simultaneously an act of resistance (an occupation against the privatization of a historical farm nearby Florence); an agroecological project (with a permaculture vegetable garden); a platform to engage with the surrounding communities and bring them back to the land (with a project of collective stewardship of olive trees); a venue for creativity and art performances; an opportunity for adults and children alike to reconnect with nature; a laboratory to preserve agricultural traditions and give them new life; a home; and, an example of what it means to live and resist together.

The next two sub-sections offer a short introduction to the history of Mondeggi and a brief reflection on the way in which this experience utilizes vocabulary and aspirations of the commons to keep together food sovereignty, land sovereignty and agroecology.

### *3.a Brief history of Mondeggi Bene Comune*

Mondeggi as a community of resistance cannot be detached from those they struggle against, i.e. the Province of Florence, and, later, the Metropolitan City of Florence. Legally speaking, Mondeggi is, in fact, a farm of over 200 hectares owned by a bankrupt public corporation, with the Province of Florence as the sole shareholder (later transferred to the City of Florence). In November 2013, after a fruitless attempt to engage in a conversation with the Province to obtain a concession on the area, the first act of trespass was organised on an abandoned olive grove. For the trespassers, some of whom then became occupiers, the action was not only about the exclusionary nature of private ownership, but about demanding that the public authority recognize the nature of the land as a collective good and facilitate the establishment of a new local food system around the land of Mondeggi. As a sign of their desire to bridge the gap between land and community, the olives were transformed into oil and distributed for free during local markets. The message was clear: what is public belongs to everyone and its benefits should be distributed rather than accumulated. In their words, priority should be given to the intrinsic connection between the “free access to land and the right to a genuine, accessible, locally produced food” (Mondeggi Bene Comune, 2017a).

At the end of 2013, after a long silence and the decision by the commoners to occupy two houses and a warehouse, the Province of Florence announced an auction for the land, hoping to find a buyer. Finding a private owner of a public land became the way in which the Province could walk away from any responsibility and any role in the management of the land. The threat of eviction suddenly became more real. However, it also increased the solidarity and the interest around the farm. When the bid went desert and the Metropolitan City of Florence replaced the Province as owner of the farm, a diverse group of activists and citizens had already gathered “around the defense of Mondeggi and intervened on its state of abandonment, intensifying the organization of events opened to the whole population to foster local awareness and sociality, take care of buildings, and develop numerous agricultural, social, and cultural projects” (Mondeggi Bene Comune, 2017a). Comforted by the events, the commoners issued a Declaration of Principles and Intents to establish the trajectories that would have guided the conversion “of abandoned public goods into common self-managed by and accessible to the community” (Mondeggi Bene Comune, 2017b). Food and land sovereignty became, together with agroecology and social justice, the new horizon to follow.

### *3.b Food and land sovereignty under the cover of the commons*

Since its inception, the experience of *Mondeggi Bene Comune* was aligned with the national campaign for Land as a Commons. It aimed to oppose the privatization of productive land and soil and to build a new proprietary regime that rejected the idea of bourgeoisie property and its vision of “sole and sole despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual” (Blackstone, 2016). To this objectifying and appropriative vision, the commoners aimed to oppose a bottom-up, participatory and autonomous proprietary form that went beyond the public/private division and focuses on democratic management, just redistribution of utilities and respect of the ecological limits of the planet. If crises are a moment of forced choice, the occupiers use this moment to define themselves against the Monti government and to be practically and theoretically involved in the creation of a commons-based alternative aimed to supporting “peasant and small-scale agriculture, constructing territorial communities and a participatory system of stewardship”

(Mondeggi Bene Comune, 2017a) where individual and socialized properties would coexist, because the most important element was not the right over something, but the duty to redistribute to those most in need.

If Hardin defines the land commons as an inevitable expression of individualism, competition, over-exploitation and lack of coordination, Mondeggi moves in the opposite direction. Mondeggi offers an example of how communities can gather around land and soil and not only in order to demonstrate an alternative way of relating to the land, but also to connect the struggle for democratic land control with a “strategic rebooting of the broader agricultural and food system” so that “such democratisation [will not] fizzle out and revert back to older or trigger newer forms of land monopoly” (Borras et al, 2015). What is most striking about the experience of Mondeggi is that the commoners utilize the vocabulary and practice of the commons to combine the struggles for land and food sovereignty. On the one hand, access to the land by people who would not afford it is essential in imagining a different food system. On the other hand, food sovereignty is identified as the long-term horizon, revealing the supremacy collective wellbeing over individual enrichment obtained to the detriment of society and the environment. Moreover, the case of Mondeggi offers a concrete example where the political ideal of food as a commons dialogues and reinforces the paradigm of food sovereignty: decommodifying food and land are assumed as the necessary premises of a democratic, just and autonomous food system.

In order to achieve this double goal of land and food sovereignty, the structure of governance reinforces and consolidates the sense of belonging and responsibility, but also recognizes the fact that different members may have different weight in the decision-making process, depending on the level of commitment and participation.<sup>v</sup> In addition, the common nature of the land also means that Mondeggi is recognized as part of a broader social context and of a planet with limited resources. As a consequence, a stewardship project was created to invite the local population to take care of olive trees and share the benefit of the harvest,<sup>vi</sup> and local markets represent a preferred venue for the sale of the farm’s products. Furthermore, the principles of agroecology are adopted as binding requirements for any agricultural practice, so that nothing in Mondeggi happens without consideration of the ecological implications of human activities. In this way, the circle is closed: under the umbrella of the commons, land sovereignty is actively practiced in order to reach food sovereignty through agroecological practices, in an inclusive way, as long as the principles, values and objectives of a just and democratic food system are respected by all who participate.

For sure, Mondeggi faces the daily reality of the threat of eviction. For example, the Italian Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Agriculture between 2013 and 2017 have identified 1500 hectares of public land to be put on the market (sold or individually rented) without considering the possibility of pursuing alternative forms of collective management or titling, such as concessions or land trusts (Terrevive, 2017). Although it is easy to be caught by a wave of optimism when visiting Mondeggi, it is important to remember that the struggle for the recognition of land and food as a commons stretches out before us, full of obstacles. The next five years will tell us whether the Mondeggi can become a significant coordinate in the movement for food sovereignty and land reform, or, on the contrary, just another missed opportunity to think differently about land and the food system.

#### 4. What Next?

As Philip McMichael (2008, p. 219) suggests, ‘the significance of the food sovereignty movement is that, in the narrative of capitalist modernity, its project is virtually unthinkable’. In the examples we have discussed, especially Mondeggi and other instances of ‘contesting’ food commoning in the UK, a similar dynamic can be seen. While they remain, in the face of the juggernaut of capitalist development, almost ‘unthinkable’, they offer deep veins of inspiration and hope in a world with apparently diminishing supplies of both. Indeed, it is the dynamic between these two poles which often get their proponents so excited. But we must also continue to bridge this gap.

The question remains then – where do we go from here? How do we ensure that these rare and ephemeral examples of the commons do not simply evaporate, or remain the exception to the rule? As we have seen, what often seems to characterise and unite the most striking examples of food commoning is their ability to bring agricultural land back into collective control. Conversely, examples which, while powerful, arguably manifest troubling (or even fatal) contradictions, are those which are not truly owned, determined and directed from the ‘bottom-up’, but are, in short, circumscribed the logic of capital, an anathema to the commons.

By way of conclusion, we offer two key observations on this apparent dichotomy. The first is an appeal: to ensure the continuation of these rare and ephemeral examples of the commons, we need to act, to join those currently fighting to build and sustain such spaces, and ensure that stories of commoning continue to be told. This appeal is of course offered reflexively; it is much easier to call others to radical action than offer a practical guide on how to do it well. The dynamics of such spaces are always in flux, and when and where they emerge is fiendishly hard to predict. So, in supplement to this appeal we also suggest renewed effort in thinking through the processes that keep such spaces in collective ownership and management.

In this regard, food sovereignty is once again of value. The food sovereignty movement offers numerous examples of collective management of land, from the now legendary MST and La Via Campesina (Holt-Giménez and Van Lammeren, this volume; Barbosa, 2016; Martinez-Torres and Rossett, 2014), to emergent examples in the Global North. In the UK, Canada, and Australia, for example, a spate of ‘people-centred food policy’ processes have been gaining momentum (see Laforge et al., 2016), not least due to their successful innovation of certain forms of civic participation, which have brought democratic legitimacy to grassroots alternatives to the corporate food regime. This promising movement is already making explicit links to food commons (e.g. The Peoples Food Policy, 2017; Esteva, 2014), and may also provide ways into radical land reform for those less comfortable with direct action. In the Global South, examples like the civic struggles to claim fair access to water, energy and food in South Africa (Bond and Galvin, this volume), show the possibility to tinker with the paradigm of commons as an old-new political claim for the dispossessed and those made disposable by the capitalist system.

Food (as has been stated many times) is eaten by everyone and therefore has incredible convening power; however, meaningful engagement with food governance and alternative food paradigms is only done by a very few. In this chapter we have told stories of people who have decided to dedicate their lives to tackle the root causes of most of the problems of the dominant

Western food system: the commodification and enclosure of land. In the United Kingdom, in Italy and elsewhere, younger and older generations are thinking, imagining and practicing new food systems starting from its core: the soil that nourishes the crops, the farm that aggregates communities, and the literal land on which we stand. We believe the co-production of this new paradigm through such exciting forms of civil-society-led processes will provide important connective tissue between the radical outliers of food commoning, the progressive property thinkers that are challenging the institutional bases of contemporary capitalism, and the broad-based support for food systems which nourish the collective, rather than enriching the few. Watch this space (and get engaged)!

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<sup>i</sup> The homogenization of land and the loss of its diversity is often the outcome of agrarian reforms based on individual titles and absolute property rights. As a consequence, this kind of political measure is increasingly opposed by bottom-up organizations like the landless movement (*Movimento Sem Terra*) in Brazil.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/short-history-enclosure-britain>

<sup>iii</sup> Another example is offered by Helping Blossom Britain, a partnership between the alcohol corporation Heineken, The Urban Orchard Project and The Bulmer Foundation. According to the project's website, "[t]he aim is to create sustainable, long-term orchards planted and managed by the community, for the community." The choice of orchards was determined by the possibility of transforming apples into cider, i.e. by the connection between nature and the activity of the corporate 'philanthropist'. Communities will gather around urban orchards and create new spaces, but these spaces have been identified by an external actor and are intrinsically connected with a business, that of alcoholic beverages, that is often criticized for the appropriation of water and staples, but also because it is increasingly concentrated and uniform. For further info, see <https://www.heineken.co.uk/article.php?article=34011413964597>.

<sup>iv</sup> We are aware of the other experiences of bottom-up and spontaneous communing of public spaces that have been taking place throughout the country, such as the Valle Theatre in Rome, the Cavallerizza in Turin, and the Colorificio Occupato in Pisa. Another experience that rotates around land is that of Caicocci, a publicly owned farmland near Perugia that was left abandoned until some members of the national network *Genuino Clandestino* took custody of it.

<sup>v</sup> Art 10 of the Declaration identifies five categories of community members, each one with different rights and duties. Those who garrison (*presidianti*), the guardians (*custodi*), the guests (*ospiti*), the wayfarers (*viandanti*) and the beneficiaries (*fruttori*). See Mondeggi (2017b)

<sup>vi</sup> For example, the project *Mondeggi Terreni Autogestiti* (Mo.TA, Mondeggi Self-Managed Land) was launched, inviting citizens and organizations to take care of a parcel of olive trees (each one of seventeen trees), manage them, clear the land around them, maintain the broader ecological balance, harvest their fruits and receive a percentage of all the oil that is produced with all the olives, including those of other parcels and other trees.<sup>vi</sup> All together, Mo.TA is about caring of the commons, creating community and strengthening their connection with the land.