

The Workplace Commons:

Towards Understanding Commoning within Work Relations

Prof. Marek Korczynski
University of Nottingham

Marek.Korczynski@Nottingham.ac.uk

Dr. Andreas Wittel,
Nottingham Trent University

andreas.wittel@ntu.ac.uk

Abstract

One of the most important focuses in social theory within the last decade has been upon the commons. We contribute to the emerging scholarship on the commons. We point out that this literature tends to neglect the workplace. We then argue that the workplace should be included as a potentially important arena of commoning. Going to studies of the workplace, we find that scholarship has implicitly found key emergent elements of commoning within the social relations of work. We develop a concept of the workplace commons, and consider arguments that the workplace commons is merely a fix for capitalism.

Introduction

One of the most important focuses in social theory within the last decade has been upon the commons. While conceptualisations of the commons vary, there is broad agreement that the commons refers to natural and cultural resources that are shared by a community of commoners. These resources are not privately owned, but are owned, maintained, and administered by the community of commoners. These resources can be different things such as land, language, music, values, knowledge or software.

The starting point for the literature on the commons is Hardin's (1968) classic argument concerning the inevitable tragedy of the commons. Led by the Nobel prize-winner, Elinor Ostrom, a group of scholars have critiqued Hardin from within the tradition of liberal philosophy. This scholarship has examined a range of cases where commoners have been able to sustain commons, and has pointed to governance principles and qualities of resources that best allow commons to be maintained (Ostrom, 1990). More recently a number of radical theorists have developed analyses that focus less on the shared resources and more on the social practice of commoning (Barbagallo et al., 2019; Bollier, 2002, 2014; Bollier and Helfrich, 2012, 2019; Caffentzis, 2013; Dardot and Laval, 2014; De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2018; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Harvie, 2004; Holloway, 2010; Linebaugh, 2008, 2014).

However, within the scholarship on the political economy of the commons, there is an unsatisfactory silence regarding how far the commons relates to contemporary production, or work settings. We address this gap. We connect two areas of social research, research on the commons and research on work. We contribute to the emerging scholarship on the commons by

exploring practices of commoning in the workplace. Using the lens of commoning (Linebaugh 2008), we re-interpret workplace practices that have already been recognised by critical labour scholars. We show shared elements of commoning across workplace practices that have previously been seen as unconnected. We also highlight important areas of struggle between efforts to develop and maintain commoning and potential enclosure or cooption of the commoning by management. This allows us to develop a conceptual definition of the workplace commons.

Why does this approach matter? Both, in academic work on the commons and in the sociology of work, there is no shortage of studies which produce a critique of capitalism. An engagement with the workplace commons is less about critiquing capitalism and more about an exploration of sites within capitalist environments that have resisted enclosure. A commons is not necessarily a happy space but it is at least partially an autonomous space from which a challenge against the capitalist order can be potentially mounted (Federici 2018). On the one hand, these sites are vulnerable due to their embeddedness in capitalist environments. As we will show, they are increasingly under attack from managerial practices. On the other hand, dialectically, these sites are full of potential as they may provide alternatives to a capitalist political economy. De Angelis (2012: 2) notes, 'it is crucial not only to defend existing commons from enclosures, but also to shape new commons as they become a crucial terrain of struggle'. An understanding of workplace commons can draw attention to their relevance, their vulnerability, and their potential to generate positive change.

The structure of our argument is as follows. First, we examine the literature on the commons and point out that this literature tends to neglect the workplace, particularly the capitalist workplace. Drawing on the work of De Angelis, we then argue that the workplace should be included as a potentially important arena for commoning. Going to studies of the workplace, we find that scholarship has implicitly found key emergent elements of commoning within the social relations of work. From this, we develop a concept of the workplace commons, and we counter arguments that the workplace commons should be seen merely as a fix for capitalism.

The revival of the commons

Neoliberal economics has succeeded over many decades in creating a framework based on two main economic entities, the market and the state, with the latter put to work for the former.

Within this narrative, the commons was largely neglected. However, with the deepening crisis of neoliberal capitalism, the interest in the commons has seen an astonishing revival. The revival of the commons is particularly noticeable due to two developments.

The first development is the reclaiming of the commons in academic theory. Nothing demonstrates this better than the award to Ostrom of the Nobel prize in Economics in 2009. Ostrom's work is a rehabilitation of the commons based on a thorough critique of Hardin's highly influential article on 'the tragedy of the commons' (1968). Hardin argued that the commons, understood as a shared resource system, does not work properly, as every commons is exposed to a structural conflict between the individual interests of the commoners and the interests of the commoning community. For Hardin, the individual interests of the commoners tend to destroy the common good. However, Hardin did not consider that commoners can

communicate, establish normative frameworks and manage possible conflicts over individual interests in productive ways. This is Ostrom's point of departure. Her work inspects the governance of a great number of sustainable commons in the material world (land, air, water, etc.). She argues that a range of principles needs to be in place for the commons to function properly. The core principles are that commoners need to establish rules and need to agree on how to sanction those commoners who fail to obey the rules.

The second development is driven by practice - notably the creation of the digital commons. The digital commons is an internet repository of code, information, knowledge, and culture that is collectively produced and freely available to everybody who wants to use or modify these resources. The digital commons emerged with the rise of hacker cultures. It has widened and accelerated on an astonishing scale with the emergence of the social web. It has spread from the peer production of software and code to the peer production of text, sound, images, and moving images, with Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, Pirate Bay and the Creative Commons some of the iconic websites. The digital commons refers to those areas of the internet that are neither commodities nor built by the market. This is a new form of production, which Benkler (2006), who is probably the most prominent theorist of the digital commons, calls variably 'non-market production', 'social production' and 'commons-based peer production'.

There are important differences between Ostrom's and Hardin's commons and the digital commons that Benkler analyses. The commons analysed by Ostrom and Hardin are made up of resources that are diminished by each marginal activity of 'consumption' of the resource, whereas in the digital commons this process does not pertain. Additionally, Ostrom's and

Hardin's commons are natural resources that have to be maintained by commoners, whereas the digital commons are commons constructed by people from scratch. While these differences are significant, it is important to see the commonalities in how they are analysed. Like Hardin, both Ostrom and Benkler root their concept of the commons in liberal theory. Both place a shared pool of resources at the very centre of their concepts. Both understand the commons most of all as a specific property regime. In contrast, a number of Marxian concepts of the commons have emerged that do not focus primarily on property or on the things that are held in common. Instead, they put social relationships at the centre of their concepts of the commons. This approach is perhaps less interested in the analysis of internal commons structures. It emphasises instead the relationship between the commons and its capitalist outside. It focuses on enclosures of the commons. It acknowledges that Marx's concept of primitive accumulation is not just a historical concept but one that is highly relevant for an understanding of contemporary capitalism. To demonstrate this point more clearly we will briefly outline the analysis of the commons within the writing of Hardt and Negri (2009), Dardot and Laval (2014), and De Angelis (2017).

Hardt and Negri (2009) theorise the commons from a political philosophy perspective. Building on their earlier work on immaterial labour, cognitive capitalism, and the biopolitical economy, they argue for the commons to replace the opposition of public and private and the politics predicated on that opposition. For them, neither the market nor the state is able to stimulate new forms of production and social organisation in the biopolitical economy. Labour power, they argue, becomes increasingly autonomous in the biopolitical economy dominated by immaterial labour. Therefore, capital meets increasing resistance from biopolitical labour. Ultimately, Hardt

and Negri re-engage with communist thought. While acknowledging that the concept of communism has been corrupted enormously, they insist on re-establishing its proper meaning. 'At a purely conceptual level we could begin to define communism this way: what the private is to capitalism and what the public is to socialism, the common is to communism' (273). For Hardt and Negri, the project to reclaim the commons is defined by three groups of struggles. The first are struggles against work. The second category are struggles against wage-labour - struggles for an alternative income to reproduce social life. The third category are struggles for grassroots democracy - 'struggles of the common against capital' (290). For Hardt and Negri, the commons far exceeds shared resources. It stands for a global project to be realised through different struggles of the multitude to create communist communities and societies.

While the shift of focus from shared resources to social relations is implicit in Hardt and Negri's idea of the commons, it is not an explicit part of their concept. Enter Dardot and Laval (2014). The latest book of the French philosophers points to the common in social movements. The book emphasises the common in the practices of self-governance within movements which involve the occupations of public spaces such as Zuccotti Park (Occupy Wall Street) and Gezi Park. Sharing the approach of Hardt and Negri, Dardot and Laval position the commons as a revolutionary project. Their concept of the common is explicitly based on a philosophical critique of intellectual traditions that have shaped our understanding of the common. The most important of these traditions is an association of the common with a category of things, such as land, water, air, knowledge etc. Against this understanding, Dardot and Laval propose a sense of the common rooted in practice. For them, the common is constructed on the basis of common values and common political principles. As O'Shaughnessy (2015: 1) summarises in a review of the book:

‘It is only the practical activity of people which can make things common, in the same way as it is only this practical activity that can produce a new collective subject.’ He explains the implications of this approach for a new understanding of the common(s): ‘So, if it is to be politically productive, the common fundamentally relates not to having things in common, nor to the sharing of common things, but to the shared activity through which people shape their relationship to the material world.’

De Angelis (building on Federici and Caffentzis) presents the most ambitious and promising concept of the commons. Similar to both Hardt and Negri (2009) and Dardot and Laval (2014), De Angelis explores a collective path towards an exit from capitalist production:

I believe there is a social revolution in the making that, if recognised and able to attract more energies from people around the world, could give us a chance to embark on a process of transformation towards postcapitalist society (...) In this book, commons are not just resources held in common, or commonwealth, but social systems whose elements are commonwealth, a community of commoners, and the ongoing interactions, phases of decision-making and communal labour process that together are called commoning.
(2017: 11)

For De Angelis, a commons as a social system consists of three elements: the common goods, the commoners (the social subjects), and the commoning (the activity of doing in common). His concept differs from Hardt and Negri in that the subjects are commoners rather than an unspecified multitude. He differs from Dardot and Laval in that the commoning should not be reduced to social movements alone. He situates the commons not just in social movements and

social struggles, but also in a much wider range of productive and reproductive activities. In fact, the commons of reproduction has a privileged role to play in the transformation to postcapitalism. Like Dardot and Laval, De Angelis differs from Hardt and Negri in that he applies a more sociological perspective on the commons as a social system. This is not merely an abstract category, but a lived system with power relations and social forces. The force field of the commons is both an endogenous force field (the internal social relations between the commoners and their practices of self-governance) and an external force field, that is characterised by the social relations between the commoners and outside capitalist forces. De Angelis' concept of the commons as a social system is unique in that it offers a range of analytic categories to be applied for empirical studies.

Capitalist workplaces as sites of commoning?

Considering that every commons is a political economy and that labour is a key category for the analysis of political economies it is surprising that the workplace, or in broader terms the realm of labour, does not feature more prominently in the literature discussed above. While Dardot and Laval have their focus on social movements, they also engage with unions and other forms of workers' self-organisation. However, they do not focus on workplaces.

The commons of Ostrom and Hardin are spaces of work. However, both theorists reduce their analysis to practices of governance and self-organisation and ignore all other aspects of commoners' work in order to secure their livelihood. Therefore, they tend to analyse the commons in isolation from capitalist environments. Hardin's herders share common land. However, their work and their livelihood do not just depend on how they self-govern the use of

the land - it also depends on the broader capitalist environment. After all, the herders need to sell the wool and the meat in a capitalist market. For this reason, their work is as much connected to the capitalist market as it is to the common land. In fact, we would argue that it is exactly this capitalist environment that influences the conclusions which Hardin makes about the 'self-interested' herders.

Benkler's analysis of the digital commons focuses on a new form of commons based peer production. While this is work, it is, by and large, unpaid work. The digital commons he analyses consists of economically productive commoners who provide, free labour. He shares the tendency of Hardin and Ostrom to ignore the tight-woven web of commons and capitalist economies. There is little acknowledgement of the crucial role of wage-labour or corporate funding in his analysis of common-based-peer production (Wittel, 2015).

Hardt and Negri put immaterial labour and biopolitical production very much at the centre of their concept of the emerging global commonwealth. While they clearly define immaterial labour as labour that produces immaterial outputs such as information, knowledge, concepts and affects, they are rather nebulous about the relationship between immaterial labour and the commons. One of the few things we can take from their analysis is the argument that the biopolitical economy will ultimately threaten the survival of capitalism. The relationship between capital and the commons is rather complex in their commonwealth. Biopolitical production is largely a part of capitalist production. However, it escapes the control of both capital and the state. In this approach, immaterial labour in capitalist societies is as much about the creation of a global

commons as it is about capital. This is a hopeful, but perhaps overly optimistic account. It does not explain how the liberating forces of biopolitical production are going to disrupt capital.

De Angelis stands out with his explicit argument that the commons does not operate simply alongside the state and capital. Rather, it is an entity that intersects with state and capital:

Commons exist both outside and inside states and capital, and to the extent that states and capital influence the subjectivities of commoners reproducing commons, states and capital are inside commons; states and capital are inside commons even if their systemic patterns and logics are outside them. Thus, for example, we find commons not only in neighbourhood associations, care networks, or reclaimed factories, but also in private enterprise, on the shop floor of factories and in the canteens of offices among co-workers supporting one another, sharing their lunch and developing forms of solidarity and mutual aid. (De Angelis, 2017: 102)

We find commons and commoning in the ‘pores’ of social labor that capital cannot control in spite of its always ‘revolutionary’ management strategies. (De Angelis, 2012: 2)

This is a radical view on the commons. It is a hybrid political economy and it can exist and grow inside capital. However, De Angelis does not explore this further. We take this as a point for development. In the following section, we explore this view by turning to the sociology of work literature. We ask whether scholars in this area have implicitly unearthed elements of what can be regarded as workplace commoning (even when these scholars use terms other than commoning in their analysis).

Commoning in sociology of work and organization studies

Some scholars in organization studies have begun to apply the concept of the commons to develop elements of organizational analysis (Fournier, 2013; O'Neil, 2015; Kostakis, 2018), but no one has yet asked what we ask here - does research in sociology of work implicitly point to key elements of commoning within the social relations of work? To respond to this question we consider the three elements of De Angelis' approach to commoning (what is held in common, who is doing the commoning, and what are the practices of commoning). We further ask if the literature implicitly points to attempts of enclosing workplace commoning, specifically by management (cf. Hanlon, 2018). As De Angelis and Harvie note (2014: 290), 'capital's increasing dependence on commons has not curbed its enthusiasm for continued enclosure'. The enclosure of the commons constitutes 'one of the great untold stories of our times' (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012: 1).

It is straightforward to translate the literature on worker cooperatives as showing workplace commoning. The shared commonwealth in worker-owned cooperatives are the tangible resource of the firm itself and the values and governance system of cooperating; the commoners are the worker-owners, and the commoning involves both the productive labour and reproductive labour in ensuring the sustainability of both the organisation and cooperative system of governance. Worker cooperatives have tended to operate only at the margins within predominantly capitalist economies, although the recent wave of worker-recovered companies, in Argentina and beyond, which are run as worker cooperatives, points to their enduring appeal (Sitrin, 2012; Ozarow and Croucher, 2014). The literature on worker cooperatives has emphasised the dangers that come from the capitalist system (Mellor et al., 1988; Cornforth, 1995). Notably, there is the

‘degeneration thesis’ which focuses on how the structures of market competition tend to undermine internal democracy and ultimately the viability of the cooperatives themselves (Langmead, 2016).

It is also straightforward to see commoning in the digital commons. Sites and platforms of digital commoning need to be built and maintained by commoners, often collaboratively, often with voluntary and non-wage-based labour (Wittel, 2015). Many sites and platforms are therefore precarious. These sites can cease to exist if either sufficient voluntary labour is not available, or if the sites cannot secure sufficient financial support. This vulnerability facilitates the enclosure of digital commons sites by capital - see Elsevier’s acquisition of the Social Science Research Network, an open access repository of academic work. Excellent research has explored the self-organising and collaborative processes of digital commoners (Coleman 2012, Jemielniak 2014, Kelty 2008, Reagle 2011, Tkacz 2015).

Going further, particularly into ethnographic studies of workplaces, we can also point to key elements of informal commoning implicitly shown in the literature on workplace relations. There is a long-standing literature which highlights the importance of informal work groups, where workers autonomously organise within the production system, creating social relations informed by mutuality, reciprocation and often solidarity. For instance, Roy’s (1954) early study points to the importance of collective norms of output restriction among informal work groups.

Ethnographic studies reveal that workers frequently enact a range of cooperative practices in and around the labour process, and that such practices are often underpinned by norms of solidarity

and reciprocation. For instance, consider this excerpt from Santino's ethnography of the work of railway porters in the USA:

[Porters] aided each other - for example, covering a fellow porter's car while the man stole a few hours' sleep, warning each other if somebody learned that a spotter was on board, and teaching new porters the tricks of the trade. (1989:70)

We can interpret such cooperative practices of informal work groups, and their underpinning values, as part of an emergent commons system. Consider each of the elements of a commoning system here. The resources that are shared are immaterial ones - cooperation that increases the autonomy of porters within the labour process, and the values that underpin such cooperation. The commoners are the railway porters. The commoning is enacted in an emergent participative manner, within a flat social hierarchy. Note also that even as the porters common, they also contribute to the surplus value creation within the capitalist system. For instance, learning the 'tricks of the trade' tends to help lubricate the flow of the labour process. Schrank's (1983: 39) ethnography of the community and mutuality of Norwegian sailors provides another example of such commoning:

[There was a] high degree of cooperation and cohesion among the crew. The drills and the meetings seemed to demonstrate the mutual concern of the Norwegian sailors and a real feeling of community. Each member of the crew knew his job when it came to protecting the others.

The ethnographic literature also shows that such informal group solidarity (as commoning) is often played out through gestures of kindness. Cavendish (1982: 67) describes a shopfloor wide

culture of mutual care and sharing. She was struck by the generosity of the poorly paid women with whom she was working:

[After returning from a two-week sick leave without pay] I was talking to Anna when she stuffed a £10 note in my trouser pocket so quickly I wasn't even really sure what it was. She was giving it to me because I would be short, having lost two weeks' wages... I was quite overwhelmed by her generosity; the gift was completely genuine, and she really didn't want the money back.

We should not assume that such cultures are a thing of the past, overtaken by rising individualism in recent decades. Korczynski's recent ethnography (2015: 42) outlines the everyday enacted community among workers in a blinds factory:

On my second day at McTells, Rachel came over to the work table to pick up a batch of roller blinds.... She picked up an armful and turned to carry them back to her stitching table, but in so doing, she caught one of the blinds on a trolley, and all the blinds spilled on the floor. Almost before she could say 'oh, bugger', there were already four people crouching down, helping her to pick the blinds up. 'Don't worry, they'll be fine', said Sheila, handing back three of the blinds to Rachel.

Korczynski goes on to report that these workers undertook much of the same informal collective practices as the railway porters noted above.

Informal commoning is not restricted to manual occupations. The emotional labour texture of service work opens up new forms of commoning in service settings. Particularly important are 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2003). These dense, informal, oral-based networks of support among service workers tend to socialise the costs of emotional labour. In Lewis' (2005:

576-7) study of emotional labour among nurses, two nurses describe the communities of coping in operation:

There are groups within the unit of people who will support each other. I mean, I know who I'd turn to if I needed somebody to talk to, or I was upset about something, and I know certainly there would be people who would come to me, so there's an informal network.

She would do the same for me and I know that and sometimes on nights it's sometimes easier because we're more of a close knit crew.... they'd be that more supportive amongst us because we feel for each other, we know we've probably been up all day and have to be up all day again tomorrow, we've probably got children, there's a little bit more to it than just a colleague so there's a lot more support offered.

Such commoning tends to be underpinned by values of friendship and mutuality that are further strengthened in social gatherings (Wittel, 1997; Bachmann, 2014).

While this literature implicitly points to important forms of commoning within work relations across time and across sectors, there is another literature which suggests that management is increasingly seeking to enclose such informal workgroup commoning through the creation of formal teamwork structures. Arguably, this is the most important management development with regard to the employment relationship over the last century - since the Hawthorne studies highlighted to management the importance of informal workgroups and their norms. Such management-initiated teamwork structures tend to be underpinned by a hierarchical threat against non-participation, and therefore, as De Angelis (2017: 208) notes, cannot be considered as commoning: 'working in a team with your line management [cannot be commoning] when it

is understood that she will discipline you or grass you out with an even higher line management.’ Such management-initiated teamwork seeks to ensure that *all* of the mutual labour that occurs contributes to surplus value creation. So, for instance, management-initiated teamwork structures among porters would involve learning the most efficient way to do the job (rather than the ‘tricks of the trade’), and would not involve such practices as covering each other’s car to allow sleep, or helping each other with the knowledge of management spotters. Existing research on teamwork has highlighted extreme cases of management-framed ‘concertive control’ (Barker, 1993) where teams become forums in which workers discipline each other, but, in the UK context, a more common finding is the incompleteness of management’s attempt to enclose informal workplace cultures within formal teamwork structures (e.g. Findlay et al., 2000). In service work settings, management is increasingly seeking to enclose communities of coping by creating management-controlled teamwork and ‘venting’ sessions (Lucas, 2005). Again, such management enclosure of commoning seeks to ensure that only those commoning practices that directly contribute to surplus value creation are reproduced and supported. There is little to suggest that they have been any more successful than the hierarchical teamwork structures in manual workplaces.

Finally, labour unions can be thought of as an important form of commoning in many capitalist economies. The shared resources are primarily the immaterial ones of solidarity and voice, the commoners are the union members themselves, and the main form of commoning that occurs through the formal union body is that of collective industrial action. There is also an established literature that points to ways in which informal workgroup reciprocal labour within occupations has been the underpinning of the growth of formal labour unions (Price 1980). In other words,

there have been important connections between informal workgroup commoning and the growth of the formal commoning of labour unions. Perhaps the greatest point of distance between many contemporary labor unions and the idea of commoning relates to the quality of sociality among union members. Notably, labor unions have been critiqued as highly bureaucratized (Hyman, 1979). One of the factors underpinning the decline of unions in recent decades has been managerial attempts to enclose areas of solidarity and voice through the human resource systems, featuring limited non-union voice mechanisms, such as works councils (Legge, 2005; Jacoby, 1998).

Workplace commons – a working definition

So far, we have outlined a tendency within the commons scholarship to neglect or even ignore the workplace as a potentially important site of commoning, have pointed to De Angelis' approach as a useful way to begin considering commoning in the workplace, and, using De Angelis as an initial guide, have shown that there is much implicit in sociology of work scholarship that points to, what can be regarded as, substantial workplace commoning. Given this, it is important to put forward a definition of a workplace commons (WPC).

De Angelis' approach focuses on three elements: what is held in common, who is doing the commoning, and what are the practices of commoning. We use this as a starting point in building a concept of the WPC and add points of elaboration and clarification, which arise mainly from the sociology of work scholarship examined in the prior section.

First, we argue that a social action can simultaneously be part of a commons system and a contribution to surplus value creation within the capitalist system. As O’Neil notes (2015: 1627), labour can be ‘*both* alienated or sold, *and* communal, as workers freely cooperate to produce commons’ (emphasis added). Social actions can have dual meanings, roles and functions. Just because an action contributes to surplus value creation does not preclude it from also contributing to a commons system, and vice versa. Second, we consider the issue of whether commoners need to make an *explicit* claim upon the commonwealth. Here, we are guided by Marx’s thesis that the analysis of praxis is more promising than the analysis of subjectivity. As Willis (1977:125) puts it, with regard to the praxis of cultures: ‘cultural forms may not say what they know, nor know what they say, but they mean what they do.’ Therefore, we are more interested in the practice of commoning than in the subjectivity of the commoner.

Third, practices of commoning are relational. Their relationality refers to three things: (1) non-hierarchical relations, (2) a specific form of collaboration, and (3) a particular quality of sociality. The non-hierarchical aspect of our definition means that the sharing of resources can only be commoning if it happens in a voluntary, non-coercive and mutual manner. Commoning need commoners who see each other as equals. For most workers, collaboration with other workers is an inherent part of their job. We exclude forms of collaboration that are simply required by the corporation. Only those forms of collaboration that are created by workers on a voluntary basis should be considered here. For example, if a worker engages with fellow workers to teach them some ‘tricks of the trade’, we can analyse this as a form of commoning if such a collaboration is not needed as the company provides guidelines for its employees on how to perform specific tasks.

The practice of commoning must also be embedded in a particular quality of sociality. We argue that we have to look beyond teamwork-based collegiality, beyond a form of sociality that can be reduced to getting along with each other to get the job done. Sedlacek (2011) points out that friendship has never been an important category for economists. Friendship is perceived as uneconomical and unnecessary for the functioning of economies. He uses the epic of Gilgamesh to demonstrate that this is rather problematic (2011: 23): ‘But it is in friendship where - often by-the-way, as a side product, an externality - ideas and deeds are frequently performed or created that together can altogether change the face of society.’ We do not think that workplace commoning has to be rooted in friendship only, but it has to be rooted in a sociality that goes beyond the limitations of collegiality, or of the increasingly prevalent ‘network sociality’ (Wittel, 2001). It is a sociality that does not merely exist because it is beneficial for productivity; it is built on care for each other. Those who engage in workplace commoning do not primarily act as homo economicus but because they see each other first and foremost as socially embedded human beings. In addition, this is a sociality that must be rooted in a set of collective values. While an identification of such values should be one of the objectives of empirical research, we insist that these values are not just individual values but are the result of an ethics of the collective. There is no commoning without an appreciation of the collective and the values that this collective holds in common.

So, if we see the WPC as a sub-set of the wider commons, as defined by De Angelis (with our additional points), our working definition of WPC comprises three elements:

- A pooled im/material resource (a commonwealth) related to the workplace. Immaterial resources include skills, qualities, values, expertise, knowledge and dispositions.
- A community of commoners (typically workers in an employment relationship), who share, reproduce and claim (either implicitly or explicitly) the commonwealth.
- Commoning, doing in common, social labour through which commonwealth and the community of commoners are (re)produced. Such commoning is relational, it is participatory and non-hierarchical, and it includes a specific form of collaboration, which is a collaboration beyond collegiality. It is also rooted in a sociality that is based on care for each other. It is based on explicit values such as solidarity and a belief in commoning as a superior form of organisation. Such values can also be implicit and emergent.

WPCs as ‘fixes’ for capitalism?

Overhanging our approach is the question of whether WPCs humanise the capitalist workplace and merely constitute forms of ‘fixes’ for capitalist firms, and potentially for capitalism more generally. This question has been aired in the Marxist literature on the political economy of the commons. Caffentzis (2004: 22) asks whether commons ‘are antagonist to and subversive of capitalist accumulation’, or whether they are ‘compatible with and potentiating of capitalist accumulation’. De Angelis (2012) asks if ‘capital needs a commons fix?’

We make four points in response to this question. First, we agree it is analytically important to understand the degree to which WPCs are supportive of, or antagonistic to, capital accumulation. For instance, there are clear and important differences between worker-owned cooperatives which exist in a largely antagonistic relationship to capital accumulation, and communities of coping in service work, which socialise the costs of emotional labour without directly challenging the commodification of that emotional labour. A mapping of WPCs on the axis of the degree to which they are supportive of or antagonist to capitalist accumulation is an important part of an analysis. Caffentzis suggests that ‘it is time... to invent... a methodology that can measure the compatibility of a commons with capital’ (2004: 27).

Second, it is crucial that we have an understanding of the *dynamics* of this issue. Whether forms of WPC are supportive of, or antagonistic to, capitalism might change over time. A WPC may support capital accumulation in a period of a stable social order, but it may also have the potential to develop into an alternative to capital accumulation in periods of crisis. As De Angelis (2012: 2) puts it: on the one hand, ‘capital... needs a commons fix... on the other hand, commons are also systems that could do the opposite: they could create a social basis for alternative ways of articulating social production, independent from capital.’ The dynamic potential for commons to develop into forms of challenges and alternatives is also present in the argument that the commons can *prefigure* a different social system (e.g. Caffentzis, 2004: 7), even while supporting, in some ways, the current social system. Marx (1973: 159) argued that we will find within the current order the seeds that will grow into the next order: ‘[I]f we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding

relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic.’

Third, it is impossible to make a claim in the abstract regarding whether WPCs are supportive or antagonistic to capital accumulation. As De Angelis (2012) argues, it is only by understanding the *contextual* power relations at play that we can see whether a commons is supportive of capital and, therefore, likely to be coopted or enclosed by management, or whether its potential as a challenge and an alternative can be articulated.

Finally, we argue that the debate over whether WPCs constitute a ‘fix’ for capitalism, in part, has been prefigured, at a less abstract level, by the debate within the sociology of work concerning how far work groups’ autonomous cultures of mutuality and solidarity were being coopted such that they mainly functioned to generate surplus value for capital.¹ The latter debate revolved around the pioneering arguments of Friedman (1977) that workers’ cultures play into a form of management control of responsible autonomy, and of Burawoy (1982: 199) that work groups by engaging in games around the labour process would be unable to challenge the wider rules of the game set by management: ‘workers are sucked into the game. But participation has the consequence of generating consent to the rules’. We believe our prior three points, relating to the abstract fix question, are applicable to this more concrete debate as well.

Conclusion

The commons and commoning are key elements in contemporary practice and in contemporary political economy scholarship. Strangely, the arena of production and work relations has been

neglected within the political economy scholarship. In this paper, we have primarily contributed to the literature on the commons by interpreting sociology of work scholarship as implicitly showing substantial and important commoning in workplaces, and by putting forward a conceptual definition of the workplace commons. In turn, this approach and the resulting definition of a WPC is productive for sociology of work analysis as we (1) highlight key elements of commoning across workplace practices that have previously been seen as unconnected, and (2) point to important areas of struggle between developing practices of commoning and potential enclosures by management.

Our approach to the WPC is both scholarly and activist. It is scholarly or academic in the sense that we are developing a framework for the empirical exploration of WPCs. Our approach provides analytical tools for empirical research. We need to conduct ethnographic studies in order to explore the links and relations between the capitalist political economy and the political economy of the WPC. We also need to consider, in a context-specific way, and with an analysis attuned to potential dynamics, how far WPCs are productive for surplus value generation, and how far they are antagonistic to capital accumulation.

Our approach is activist in the sense that we are academic commoners who believe both in the collaborative commoning in our profession and in the wider political project of the commons (Harvie 2004). We live in times when it appears, with the demise of the labour movement, that there is little to hold back rampant capitalism. Perhaps rather than hoping for a revival of a traditional union-based labour movement, we need to think and act creatively in terms of the commons: we may be moving to a primary contestation of the power of capital by commoning.

Our analysis suggests that there is potential for the workplace commons to play an important role in such a contestation. By showing what is implicitly shared in workplace commoning, we can begin to consider ways of connecting these various elements into a new movement of the workplace commons. As Caffentzsis (2004: 5) noted in relation to the formation of the antiglobalization coalitions of the 1990s, showing what is shared, and using the language of the commons to highlight what is shared can be a first step in the development of a movement.

¹ Indeed, we note the symmetry of De Angelis' discussion of whether WPCs constitute a 'fix' for capital, and Roy's (1954) labelling of the shopfloor compromise to accommodate productive forms of work group autonomy as 'the fix'. The same workplace that was studied by Roy was later studied by Burawoy.

- Bachmann, G (2014) *Kollegialität: Eine Ethnografie der Belegschaftskultur im Kaufhaus*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus.
- Barbagallo, C, Beuret, N, Harvie, D (2019) *Commoning with George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici*. London: Pluto Press.
- Barker, J R (1993) Tightening the iron cage: concertive control in self-managing teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38: 408–437.
- Benkler, Y (2006) *The Wealth of Networks*. Yale University Press.
- Bollier, D (2002) *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth*. London: Routledge.
- Bollier, D (2014) *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*. New Society Publishers.
- Bollier, D, Helfrich, S (2012) *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*. Levellers Press.
- Bollier, D, Helfrich, S (2019) *Free, Fair and Alive. The Insurgent Power of the Commons*. New Society Publishers.
- Burawoy, M (1982) *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Caffentzis, G (2004) A tale of two conferences: Globalisation, the crisis of neoliberalism and the question of the commons. *The Commoner*. Available at: www.commoner.org
- Caffentzis, G (2013) *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and Value*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Cavendish, R. (1982). *Women on the Line*. Routledge.

Coleman, G (2012) *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Free Software*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cornforth, C (1995) Patterns of cooperative management: Beyond the degeneration thesis. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 16(4), 487-523.

Dardot, P, Laval, C. (2014, republished in 2019) *Common. On Revolution in the 21st Century*. London: Bloomsbury.

De Angelis, M (2012) Crisis, capital and cooptation: Does capital need a commons fix? In Bollier, D, Helfrich, S (eds) *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*. Levellers Press.

De Angelis, M (2017) *Omnia Sunt Communia*. London: Zed Books.

De Angelis, M, Harvie, D (2014) The commons. In Parker, M, Cheney, G, Fournier, V, and Land, C. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization*. London: Routledge, 280-93.

Federici, S (2018) *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland, CA: Kairos/PM Press.

Findlay, P, McKinlay, A, Marks, A, Thompson, P (2000) In search of perfect people teamwork and team players in the Scottish spirits industry. *Human Relations* 53(12): 1549-1574.

Fournier, V (2013). Commoning: on the social organisation of the commons. *M@n@gement* 16(4): 433-453.

Friedman, A L (1977) *Industry and Labour*. London: Macmillan.

Hanlon, G (2018) The first neo-liberal science: Management and neo-liberalism. *Sociology* 52(2): 298-315.

Hardin, G (1968) The tragedy of the commons. *Science* 162(13): 1243-1248.

Hardt, M, Negri, A (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harvie, D (2004) Commons and community in the university: some notes and some examples. *The Commoner* 8. Available at: www.commoner.org.uk

Holloway, J (2010) *Crack Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.

Hyman R (1979). The politics of workplace trade unionism: Recent tendencies and some problems in theory. *Capital & Class* 8: 54–67.

Jacoby, S M (1998). *Modern Manors*. Princeton University Press.

Jemielniak, D (2014). *Common Knowledge?* Stanford: Stanford University Press,

Kelty, C M (2008) *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Duke University Press.

Korczynski, M. (2003). Communities of coping: collective emotional labour in service work. *Organization*, 10(1), 55-79.

Korczynski, M. (2015). *Songs of the factory: Pop music, culture, and resistance*. Cornell University Press.

Kostakis, V (2018) In defense of digital commoning. *Organization* 25(6): 812-818.

Langmead, K (2016). Challenging the degeneration thesis: the role of democracy in worker cooperatives? *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity*, 5(1), 79-98.

Legge, K (2005) *Human Resource Management*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Lewis, P (2005) Suppression or expression: an exploration of emotion management in a special care baby unit. *Work, employment and society*, 19(3), 565-581.

Linebaugh, P (2008) *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Linebaugh, P (2014) *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*. Oakland: PM Press.

- Lucas, R (2005) *Customer Service*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Marx, K (1973) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (M. Nicolaus, Trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Mellor, M, Hannah, J, Stirling, J (1988) *Worker Cooperatives in Theory and Practice*. Open University Press.
- O'Neil, M (2015) Labour out of control: The political economy of capitalist and ethical organizations. *Organization Studies*, 36(12), 1627-1647.
- Ostrom, E (1990) *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- O'Shaughnessy, M (2015) Thinking about the common with Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval. Available at: <https://lafranceetlacrise.org/2015/12/02/thinking-about-the-common-with-thinking-about-the-common-with-pierre-dardot-and-christian-laval/>
- Ozarow, D, Croucher, R (2014) Workers' self-management, recovered companies and the sociology of work. *Sociology* 48(5): 989-1006.
- Price, R (1980) *Masters, Unions and Men*. Cambridge University Press.
- Reagle, J (2011) *Good Faith Collaboration. The Culture of Wikipedia*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Roy, D (1954) Efficiency and 'the fix': Informal intergroup relations in a piecework machine shop. *American Journal of Sociology* 60(3): 255-266.
- Santino, J (1989) *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Schrank, R. (1983) *Industrial Democracy at Sea: Authority and Democracy on a Norwegian Freighter*. MIT Press.
- Sedlacek, T (2011) *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street*. Oxford University Press.

- Stritin, M (2012) *Everyday Revolutions*. London: Zed Books.
- Tkacz, N (2015) *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*. University of Chicago Press.
- Willis, P (1977) *Learning to Labour*. London: Saxon House.
- Wittel, A. (1997) *Belegschaftskultur im Schatten der Firmenideologie. Eine ethnographische Fallstudie*. Berlin: Sigma.
- Wittel, A. (2001). Toward a network sociality. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6), 51-76.
- Wittel, A. (2013). Counter-commodification: The economy of contribution in the digital commons. *Culture and Organization*, 19(4), 314-331.