

AGAINST THE COMMON GOOD: THE ROLE OF CAPITALIST CONSUMER CULTURE

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Current commoning issues....

- the exploitations of a long and still on-going history of colonial and post-colonial land-grabbing, dispossession and neo-liberal commercial expansion;
- global-wide issues relating to the knowledge commons, the urban commons, government initiatives and civil society experiments in commoning;
- legal challenges to states to act on issues like climate change and pollution and whether these could lay the foundations for commons-based practices;
- The contested legality of 'grey' areas of commoning (squatting, the seizure of urban space for community projects, etc.);
- and now the overall project of a cosmopolitan commoning as the desired sequel to and replacement for neo-liberal capitalism

Many commoning theorists are now insisting on the rupture with capitalist values and ways of living essential to the realisation of any fair and sustainable order

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How do we conceive of growth ?

As needed forms of productive expansion within an economic system that is being redesigned in order to foster ways of living and ideas of prosperity very different from those of profit-driven, capitalist consumer culture ?

Or as an essential and permanent dynamic of any effective economic order, and thus as both compatible with environmental conservation and enduringly sustainable?

If the latter, it has to be rejected – since more efficient technologies have always led to overall expansion in resource use and commodities

Where my 'alternative hedonism' aligns with current commoning thinking...

- Both are calling for a reconceptualization of 'progress' that has affinities with earlier romantic antipathies to modernity, but avoids the puritanism and social conservatism associated with traditionalist cultures of resistance.
- Both view a cultural revolution in thinking on welfare and prosperity as essential to the 'reevaluation of values' through which any transition to a post-colonial and post-growth order can alone be carried through.
- But the focus of 'alternative hedonist' argument is on the ways in which affluent consumer society may – in virtue of its own more negative aspects and the discontents engendered by them – be contributing to its own demise, or, at any rate, to a socio-economic reconstruction that proves to be both more eco-benign and more open to new commoning practices.

The disparities between richer and poorer nations and peoples in the contribution to climate breakdown and environmental degradation

- **Between 1990 and 2015, the richest ten percent of the global population accounted for over half the emissions added to the atmosphere.**
- **The richest *one* percent was responsible for 15 percent of emissions during this time – more than all the citizens of the EU and more than twice that of the poorest half of humanity (7 percent).**
- **Over the same period, annual emissions grew by 60 per cent, and the richest 10 percent blew one third of our remaining global 1.5C carbon budget, compared to just 4 percent for the poorest half of the population.**
- **If this wealthiest ten per cent were to reduce their emissions to only the average for the EU, total global emissions would fall by a quarter.**
- **But if the poorest third of the world population were to raise themselves above the \$3.2 dollar-a-day poverty line, emissions would rise by a mere five per cent - about one third of the emissions of the richest one per cent (Chancel, Bothe and Voituriez, 2023 (Climate Inequality Report 2023, World Inequality Lab Study 2023/1. Available at: <https://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CBV2023-ClimateInequalityReport-2.pdf>).**

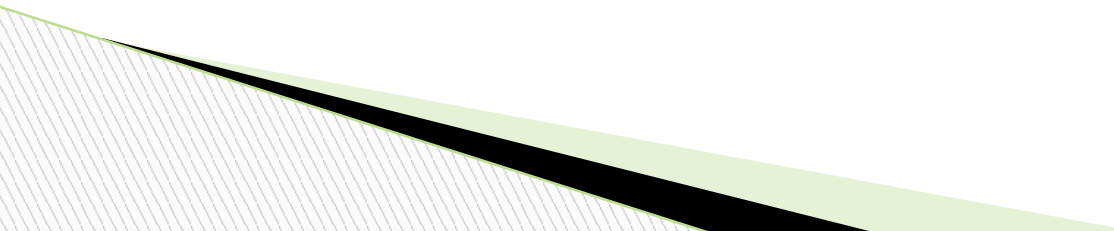
‘Half the world’s population, led by the top 10% of the income distribution – and, above all, by the global elite – drive a globe-spanning productive system that destabilises the environment for everyone. The worst effects are suffered by the poorest, and in the coming decades the impact will become progressively more extreme. And yet their poverty means they are virtually powerless to protect themselves. This is the triple inequality that defines the climate global equation: the disparity in responsibility for producing the problem; the disparity in experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis; and the disparity in the available resources for mitigation and adaptation’ (Adam Tooze, The climate emergency really is a new type of crisis – consider the ‘triple inequality’ at the heart of it. *Guardian*: 23 November 2023).







The 'Alternative Hedonist' critique

- Points to the many negative consequences of Euro-American style affluence for consumers themselves (time-scarcity, stress, ill-health, congestion, air pollution, noise, excessive waste etc.)...
 - Highlights what people are beginning to experience themselves about the 'anti' or 'counter' consumerist aspects of their own needs and preferences...
 - Draws out its implications for the consolidation of a broader systemic opposition to the existing order
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‘Avant-garde nostalgia...’

- **To defend the progressive dimension of this kind of yearning against the exigencies of growth-driven 'progress' is not to recommend a more ascetic existence.**
- **On the contrary, it is to highlight the puritanical, disquieting, and irrational aspects of contemporary consumer culture.**
- **It is to speak for the forms of pleasure and happiness that people might be able to enjoy were they to opt for an alternative economic order.**
- **It is to open up a new ‘political imaginary’: a seductive vision of alternatives to resource-intensive consumption, centred on a reduction of the working week and a slower pace of living**

<https://youtu.be/G3ZA76dttys>

‘Structure of Feeling’

‘...emergent or pre-emergent responses or qualitative changes of affect that do not have to await definition or rationalisation before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action’ (Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977: 132; cf. 128-136).

‘The notion that growth equates with progress seems to lead some people to think that the issue of whether the planet will be inhabitable a hundred years from now is subordinate to indications that an increasing share of the world’s population is modestly improving its health, education, and purchasing-power. In this view, in other words, it does not seem to matter so much if we are generating changes that will lead to the extinction of our species, if increasing numbers of people today live somewhat longer, spend more years in school, and are able to consume a bit more than their parents’(Alf Hornborg, *Nature, Society and Justice in the Anthropocene: Unravelling the Money-Energy-Technology Complex*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2018: 42).

Juliet Schor on 'Plenitude'

'We are circling back and plenitude is a synthesis of the pre- and postmodern. From the former it borrows the vision of skilled artisans producing for their own use as well as for the market (...). From the postmodern period comes advanced technology and smart, ecologically parsimonious design. It's the perfect synthesis. Technology obviates the arduous and back-breaking labour of the preindustrial. Artisan labour avoids the alienation of the modern factory and office', (Schor, *Plenitude*, Penguin, 2010, p.127).

Nemonte Nenquimo, co-founder of the indigenous and non-profit organisation, Ceibo Alliance, and first female president of the Waorani organisation in the Ecuadorian Amazon

‘You forced your civilisation upon us, and now look where we are: global pandemic, climate crisis, species extinction and, driving it all, widespread spiritual poverty. In all these years of taking, taking, taking from our lands, you have not had the courage, or the curiosity, or the respect to get to know us. To understand how we see, and think, and feel, and what we know about life on this Earth’.

(‘A message to the Western World’, *Guardian*, October 12, 2020)

In a transition period, collaborative production and consumption...

- Can check the individualisation of consumption
- Challenge the dominant consumerist aesthetics of 'newness'
- Provide hubs for exerting pressure on corporations to end reliance on sweat-shop labour and ever faster turn-over times, and to render them accountable for the pollution incurred in production
- Influence policies on 'disinvestment' thereby putting pressure on politicians to introduce across-the-board emission reductions, and acting as a first stage in the de-legitimisation of further fossil fuel extraction

...a form of social cooperation that resists the dominant paradigm of modern life, that operates outside the code and protocol of capitalist-dominated social cooperation; it is a form of social cooperation in which profit for profit's sake, expropriation and competitiveness are not the dominant drivers of the forms and goals of cooperation, and that thus provides fundamentally different meanings and sustenance for life in common (De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*, London: Zed Books, 2018: 207-8).

...public works and amenities were the aggregate product of a whole community's labour, paid for by means of general taxation, and should be regarded as forms of common pool resources, enhancing the capabilities of the people as a whole and conditioning the wellbeing of all. Their status as common wealth, that is, as collectively held goods and resources, should grant them the quality of an inalienable inheritance. Their increasing privatisation in neoliberal times is thus a process of disinheritance that impoverishes everyone' (Venn, *After Capital*, London: Sage 2018: 22).

Not only opposed visions of a just society, but quite incommensurable understandings of what it means to be human at all, implying a struggle over conflicting perceptions of what is possible and what is equitable, thus a struggle over disjunct political philosophies and imaginaries.

Equally, it is a struggle about defending hard-won political spaces and protecting socio-cultural common wealth such as free public libraries and spaces, as well as about opening up new spaces for inventing ways of being which have not and, indeed, could not have existed before, since the technical, environmental and cultural conditions of possibility for such a future were absent (Venn, 2018: 18).