The Long Now of the Commons
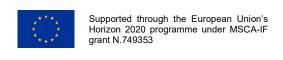
People, Infrastructures, and Dilemmas

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IT University of Copenhagen

IT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

Introduction

Over the past few decades, concerns around the future of the commons – meaning collectively managed resources endangered by different forms of enclosures – have opened up inquiries into promoting fairer and more sustainable ways of being and acting together in the world. Commoning – the social practice of managing resources for everyone's benefit – promotes ways of resisting and creating alternatives to the inequalities, contradictions, and threats of contemporary neoliberal western societies. Concrete examples of commoning abound in any human sphere: from the re-appropriation of urban spaces (*e.g.* through social housing, hackerspaces, urban gardening) to the nurturing of open digital spaces and infrastructures (*e.g.* commons-based peer production, creative commons); from environmental care (*e.g.* environmentalist collectives, energy saving communities) to political actions for (re)democratizing the economy and the society (*e.g.* platform cooperativism, anarchist commons).

The Long Now of the Commons - People, Infrastructures and Dilemmas was a full-day, public, dissemination event that took place on 17 October 2019, at the IT University of Copenhagen.

The event aimed to disseminate knowledge about contemporary forms of commoning as historically, culturally, and politically situated practices. The people, infrastructures, and dilemmas involved in commoning were put at the center of the full-day public seminar. *The Long Now of the Commons* hosted contributions by internationally renowned researchers and practitioners who have developed considerable experience on the topic over the past years.

The day was structured around a series of presentations and panels with ample space for comments and questions from the audience. Students, researchers, practitioners, activists, and policy makers were invited to attend the event.

In this brief report, we summarize the content of the event and provide links to the material produced and showed during *The Long Now of the Commons.* About 40 people attended the event.

The event was organized by Giacomo Poderi and Joanna Saad-Sulonen (IT University of Copenhagen), and it was funded through the project grant 749353, of the H2020/MSCA-IF-2016 call.

Talks

Opening & Welcome

Lone Malmborg - Head of Digital Design Department, IT University of Copenhagen

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/byv8nRF1f4Wn

Free, Fair and Alive: The Power of the Commons

Silke Helfrich - Founding member of Commons Strategies Group

The commons can be seen as an attitude, as a practice or as a worldview. Whatever understanding you prefer - it will open up new possibilities for change; reorient our language, our perceptions and our political strategies. It is widely accepted that the power of the commons can only be properly understood through the analysis of commoning, including its internal, interpersonal dynamics. Because the commons is not a certain type of resource, in the style of standard economics or a certain type of institution as the Ostrom framework suggests. Commons are living social processes. They rely on a whole set of human values and behaviors that the standard economic narrative regards as marginal. Silke Helfrich will introduce the Triad of Commoning with its three dimensions: the Social Life of Commoning, Provisioning through Commons and Peer Governance through Commoning, challenging prevailing categories of thought and terms that belong "to a fading era". Silke's talk is based on her recent book co-written with David Bollier: Free, Fair and Alive. The Insurgent Power of the Commons.

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/tXzqOuq7wORJ

Peer Production and State Theory: Envisioning a Cooperative Partner State

Alex Pazaitis - Tallinn University of Technology

This essay examines the concept of the Partner State, as a new form of symbiosis between state and civil society, based on the principles and practices of Peer Production. The general stance of Peer Production advocates is almost intrinsically anti-state. However, state theory arguably reveals that the examination of the state and its institutions actually helps us understand the position and potentials of Peer Production. A tentative union between Hegelian and Gramscian thought delineates *why* and *how* the State can, and arguably should, embrace and support Peer Production. Finally, a tentative framework for these prefigurative institutions is offered by Open Cooperativism.

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/03HOGlhegdNt

Mapping the firm-project network

Mathieu O'Neil - University of Canberra

IT firms have embraced open source licenses and the 'hacker ethic' of self-fulfillment. In 2018, Google moved from Ubuntu to Debian; Microsoft bought GitHub, and IBM Red Hat; 85% of Linux code was produced by firm employees. Firms are paying the salaries of some developers but are also 'free riding' on the unpaid labor of others. Should benefits be shared, and what is the impact on projects? How can an invisible phenomenon be mapped? To answer, we track the commits made by firm employees to GitHub repositories and collect text featuring F/OSS project-firm co-locations in three IT news media. We then compare the two firm-project networks: financial connections and media representations.

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/he8ow2rVrrh4

Caring about the commoners – Affect and long-term commitments to commoning

Giacomo Poderi - IT University of Copenhagen

Nowadays, it is generally acknowledged that "there is no commons without commoning" and that commons portray ways of being in the world that are fairer, more sustainable and democratic than those provided by capitalist and neo-liberal ones. However, the practical challenges, the implications, and the meaning that 'to keep commoning' has for the commoners is largely neglected. This talk will focus on commoners' long-term commitment to commoning practices and will address the affective and practical dimensions of maintaining such commitment over time. The talk is grounded on the empirical work conducted for an ongoing research project on the long-term sustainability of commoning practices funded under the project grant 749353, of the H2020/MSCA-IF-2016.

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/ovhxzcPvrBYC

Commoning and Participatory Design – a Love Story?

Maurizio Teli - Aalborg University

Commoning practices, intended as practices that nurture the entanglement of symbolic and material elements life on Earth relies upon and reproduces are becoming more and more widespread. In contemporary commoning practices, the assumption that humankind should democratically access what human beings share goes together with experimentation in new institutional forms. With these premises, the talk will discuss how participatory design, originated in the democratization of the workplace aside the introduction of new technologies, can provide commoners, the ones engaging with commoning practices, with approaches, concepts, and methods, capable of supporting commoning of technologies and through technologies. In conclusion, the talk will explore how a commoning-oriented conceptualization of love can strengthen the convergence of commoning and participatory design.

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/YxbXGbqpE4SD

Commoning for housing justice

Mara Ferreri - University of Northumbria

Dwelling and home-making are core to individual and collective practices of social reproduction and belonging; yet, housing is increasingly experienced by many as a place of precarity and dispossession. Can commons theory help to imagine and initiate transformative practices for housing justice? In this contribution, I will introduce key issues for thinking critically about housing as a commons, looking at material conditions, infrastructures, self-organization, openness and long-term maintenance. To ground the discussion, I will draw upon my recent research into historical and contemporary examples of housing commoning and their material and symbolic legacy.

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/gOhf6iRkLO6y

Citizen labs as commons laboratories. Local and international approaches

Marcos Garcia - Medialab Prado, Madrid

Citizen laboratories are infrastructures that help to grow local commons and scale them up. Public institutions like libraries, schools, universities, museums, hospitals, parliaments, and research centers could also offer space for open experimentation and collaboration for the building of new commons. These commons laboratories can be connected internationally and build a network that becomes a counterweight to the global forces that destroy local life. In my presentation I would like to explore this proposal from the experience at Medialab Prado and the model of the citizen laboratory that we have experimented the last twelve years.

Link to talk and slides set: https://use.vg/wgaroiSxrJg6

Discussion Panels

The two panel sessions included a mixture of conversations triggered by the panelists themselves and questions or comments raised by the audience in the room.

Morning session

Alex Pazaitis, Giacomo Poderi, Mathieu O'Neil, Silke Helfrich. Moderated by Joanna Saad-Sulonen (IT University of Copenhagen).

The morning panel focused on various aspects linked to the challenges and feasibility of transitioning towards a society that is more welcoming for the commons and where commons and commoning can become valid alternatives to capitalist appropriation and dispossession of the value of social relations. Here, the challenges of identifying and implementing in practice strategies that account for short or medium and long-term visions emerged.

The importance of working to change people's perception and understanding of the value of commons was thoroughly discussed. For instance, ten years ago, Wikipedia 10 was not considered a valuable source of encyclopedic knowledge and looked with suspicion by many; while nowadays despite its problems, it is well respected. At the same time, people still value much more the interactions allowed by Facebook (or other mainstream platforms) over other open and collaborative platforms that remain confined to niches.
We also need to engage with our own perception about the commoners, for instance by avoiding to talk about them as 'volunteers', and by stressing their importance; that is to recognize properly their value.

The challenge to identify the core values that a commons initiative, or a commoning practice, tries to promote is a first crucial step along the more strenuous work of defending those values over time. In fact, the 'corporate' and market driven interests often intersect and try to appropriate and dispossess those initiatives which emerge and consolidate.

Afternoon session

Mara Ferreri, Marcos Garcia, Maurizio Teli. Moderated by Giacomo Poderi (IT University of Copenhagen).

The afternoon panel focused on the experiences that emerged from different situated commoning practices: social housing, participatory interventions towards new forms of welfare, and citizens' lab. During this session, the conversation spanned over different topics.
The importance of working to make people feel comfortable and welcomed in the commons environment is an aspect that deserves constant care. Mediation here is considered a key aspect: not only in terms of mediating different cultural and social backgrounds among commoners, but more broadly in the sense of mediating distances between those who might

benefit from understanding the value of commoning and those who already understand it. Commoners must go and 'reach out the neighborhood'.

The challenge of documenting practices, processes, challenges, and histories of commons initiatives is a critical one, as it requires extensive work, which rarely can be performed properly, when commoners are actually already very busy and engaged in commoning. Documenting such practice, should be understood as a concrete and active dimension of commoning.
This also highlights once more the need for people with technical skills, in this case for documenting, but also more generally for other aspects of commoning.
The identification of new forms of measurements that can highlight the alternative set of values promoted by the commons and commoning, gathered attention during the discussion, as it needs to be carefully considered and balanced. On the one hand, being able to highlight which values are at stake can be relevant for gaining legitimacy. However, on the other hand, measuring and rationalizing values, even though very different from the economic ones, can be the first step in exposing the commons to the possibility to be incorporated in and dispossessed by capitalist practices. Therefore, whether or not we need or want to measure something new, always need careful considerations.

Finally, the commons can provide those contexts for citizens and society in general, where it is possible to experiment and where failure is a perfectly acceptable outcome of experimentations. This is something that is needed, but which also needs constant support, both from commoners and institutions.

About the speakers

Alex Pazaitis is a core member of the interdisciplinary research collective P2P Lab, spin-off of the Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance, Tallinn University of Technology and of the P2P Foundation. He holds an MA in Technology Governance and is Junior Research Fellow and PhD candidate at the Ragnar Nurkse Department. Alex is a core team member of the COSMOLOCALISM project and has been involved in numerous research activities, including scholarly papers and research and innovation projects. He has professional experience in project management and has worked as a consultant for private and public organizations. His research interests include technology governance; innovation policy; digital commons; open cooperativism and distributed ledger technologies.

Giacomo Poderi is a Marie Curie postdoctoral researcher at the IT University of Copenhagen. His current project focuses on the sustainability of different commoning practices (e.g. urban, digital, knowledge commons) and takes particular interest at commoners' long-term commitment. His research interests concern the interplay between society, Information, and Communication Technology through the lenses of co-construction and participatory processes. More concretely, he is interested in the role that participation plays in mediating use, design, and development aspects of ICT. His latest publication is "Sustaining platforms as commons" in *CoDesign* 15(3).

Mara Ferreri is research fellow in Human Geography at the University of Northumbria. Until recently, she held a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellowship at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain (see: http://commoninghousing.net/). Her work on urban precarity, commons, housing and temporariness has been published in international journals such as *Transactions of the IBG, cultural geographies* and *Geoforum*. She is a founding editor of the open-access international [*Radical Housing Journal*](Radical Housing Journal).

Marcos Garcìa is the artistic director of Medialab-Prado since 2014, an initiative of the Madrid City Hall, devised as a citizen laboratory for the production, research and dissemination of cultural projects that explores forms of experimentation and collaborative learning that have emerged with digital networks. From 2006 to 2013, he was in charge of coordination and programming at Medialab-Prado, alongside Laura Fernández. Previously, from 2004 to 2006, they set up the education programme of MediaLabMadrid, developing the cultural mediation programme and the Interactivos? project, a platform for production and research into the creative and educational applications of technology. Marcos has taken part in numerous international events about digital culture and the commons.

Mathieu O'Neil is Associate Professor in Communication at the University of Canberra and Adjunct Research Fellow in the School of Sociology at the ANU. His interests are the sociology of fields and controversies, social network analysis, and labor and organization studies. He is currently investigating waged and volunteer labor in F/OSS projects thanks to a grant from the Sloan Foundation. Mathieu's research has been published in Social Networks, Information, Communication and Society, Réseaux, and Organization Studies, amongst others. In 2006 he

contributed to the founding of the Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks, a world leader in e-social science, and in 2010, he founded the *Journal of Peer Production*.

Maurizio Teli is Associate Professor at the Department of Planning, Aalborg University, Denmark. His research focuses on participatory design and commoning in relation to digital platforms. He has more than fifty publications, including the book "*Beyond Capital: Values, Commons, Computing and the Search for a Viable Future*" (co-authored with David Hakken and Barbara Andrews, Routledge, 2016) and the co-edited special issue of CoDesign - International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts "*Repositioning CoDesign in the age of platform capitalism: from sharing to caring*" (with Gabriela Avram, Jaz Hee-jeong Choi, Stefano De Paoli, Ann Light, and Peter Lyle, 2019).

Silke Helfrich is an independent activist, author, scholar, and speaker. She cofounded the Commons Strategies Group and Commons-Institute, was former head of the regional office of Heinrich Böll Foundation for Central America, Cuba, and Mexico, and holds degrees in Romance languages/pedagogy and in social sciences. Helfrich is the editor and co-author of several books on the Commons, and she blogs at www.commons.blog. She lives in Neudenau, Germany.