

## **Problematizing the commons: New insights into the promises and perils of commoning**

Call for papers, Special Issue, Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia, edited by Luigi Pellizzoni (Università degli Studi di Trieste)

### **Abstract**

There is no shortage of literature on the commons. Globalization and its crisis have imparted growing momentum to research and debate over the issue. Yet, the field has also become increasingly contested.

For a start, definitions are less univocal than it might seem, ranging from taxonomies of material and immaterial resources to accounts of fundamental rights of access, or claims about insurgent emancipatory dynamics as expressions of «the common» (in the singular) – the potential residing in humans' shared intellectual, linguistic and affective capacities. Research topics are heterogeneous as well: from natural resources, such as water or forests, to urban spaces; from work to software and genetic data. The focus of inquiry, moreover, can be either on established arrangements or on emergent practices of «commoning». Also inspirational sources diverge: medieval commons are preferred by many; others look at Roman law, with its category of things deemed unavailable to both private commerce and state control; some favours indigenous (especially Latin American) accounts of human-nonhuman compounds; someone else focuses on surviving arrangements in western countries, from collective properties to «civic uses».

Partly as a result of the prominent role played in the debate by political philosophy, economics and legal studies, approaches are often normative in outlook and intent, which is not necessarily beneficial to a dispassionate analysis. Social movements students are increasingly interested in commoning processes, though they are often more attentive to established research issues (mobilization dynamics, action repertoires etc.) than to what is usually regarded as a distinctive feature of the commons: namely, the close intermingling of, or circular relationship between, «things» – or places – and human groups. Practice studies are especially interested in such issue, yet not necessarily in why and how the commons emerge and endure. Sociology boasts a tradition of community studies and action research in urban and rural contexts, yet, besides naïve assumptions of immediate correspondence, there is no easy way to link «community» with the «commons» – which presupposes or produces which, or how they mould themselves together. Finally, the literature celebrating the virtues of the commons against the state and market capitalism's failures is challenged by other scholarship, more prudent in its evaluations especially considering the implications of such virtues in the present historical conjuncture.

In brief, there is ample space for critical inquiry into the commons from a social science perspective. The call aims to collect papers capable of providing novel theoretical and empirical insights, with special reference to the following problem-fields:

1) *The commons, citizen engagement and democracy*. The case for the commons includes a plea for the overcoming of the public/private dichotomy and the promotion (or revitalization) of people's engagement in matters of own concern. Yet, democratic institutions are increasingly hollowed out or

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bypassed by corporate governments, public/private partnerships and orchestrated citizen activation. Also, research shows that business increasingly regards material and immaterial commons, from ecosystem services to cognitive sharing and cooperation (open source, crowdsourcing/funding etc.), as a source of surplus value. In this context, the case for the commons and people's «empowerment» might entail a defence of, rather than an attack on, representative democracy, private property and individual choice. This also raises a question about the extent to which, and how, the commons should be regulated by law.

2) *The commons and the local*. Research on traditional commons, beginning with Ostrom's work, shows how inclusion and equality «within» often entails exclusion and hierarchy «outside». This seems to apply also to new types of commons (transition towns, community supported agriculture and energy initiatives, solidarity purchase groups, squatting, mobilizations over issues of place and territory etc.), looking at which someone notes elements of protectionism, particularism, misrecognition of wider social interests and connections. The implications of this sort of negative externality of commoning deserve further investigation (how to disentangle the local from the localist?), and a historical perspective may help to understand how the trade-off between internal benefits and external costs can be reduced or even dissolved. Also, if emergent experiences build on a strengthened solidarity among people and a different, more equitable and sustainable, relationship with the materiality of things and spaces, they may result for this very reason functional to the ruling order, since they help to cope with the crisis and to reconstitute the social fabric. On what conditions, then, could these initiatives grow to actually challenge conventional production, circulation and consumption processes? And what about growing attempts to valorise (the term itself is problematic) the local as encapsulating a unique blend of sociality, culture and ecosystem services – perhaps expressing a peculiar «spirit of the place» (*genius loci*)?

3) *The commons and new technologies*. The relationship between the commons and new technologies is ambiguous. For example, biotechnologies are applied in order to «revamp» traditional varieties and agricultural practices. More in general, the erasure of the nature/culture or human/nonhuman divide, a core element of the theory and practice of the commons, increasingly characterizes a host of technological «hybrids» (from brain-computer interfaces to nanodevices). Hence, its conduciveness to less exploitative relations with the biophysical world (including the human body) cannot be taken for granted. Also, technological advancements determine new opportunities of commoning and new sorts of commons, in fields ranging from ICTs (open source, e-waste hacking etc.) to biotech (biobanks, DYI-bio, etc.), yet the extent to which these new material and immaterial commons can be assimilated to traditional ones is still unclear.

## Deadlines and guidelines

Abstracts due by April 30, 2017. All abstracts (500 words), with 5 keywords, in English, should be sent as e-mail attachments (Word Format) to: [LUIGI.PELLIZZONI@dispes.units.it](mailto:LUIGI.PELLIZZONI@dispes.units.it).

Communication from the Editor concerning the selection of articles by May 30, 2017.

Submission of first versions of articles to be refereed should be sent to the editor by September 15, 2017. Articles – written in English – should follow the journal guidelines and sent to: [LUIGI.PELLIZZONI@dispes.units.it](mailto:LUIGI.PELLIZZONI@dispes.units.it).

Communication from the Editor concerning the peer-review process by November 15, 2017.

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