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## COMMONING INNOVATIONS FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

THE DISRUPTIONS CAUSED BY COVID-19 are challenging countless premises of modern life, but there is no consensus yet on whether we should regard the pandemic as a transitory interruption of 'normal' or an indictment of the/modern state and capitalism, a.k.a., the market/state system.

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that we stand at a crossroads: shall we try to restore fragile, integrated global markets dedicated to the neoliberal fantasy of unlimited economic growth even though it entails horrific disruptions of nature, racism, inequality and neocolonialism? Or shall we attempt to build a more distributed, eco-mindful, place-based system that is resilient and fair?

After first responders deal with the emergencies of this moment, we need some second responders to help emancipate us from archaic worldview and ineffective institutions and infrastructures. We face huge temptations to revert to old ideological patterns of thought and politics, but the best way through the crisis is to re-imagine systems of provisioning and governance.

The Overton Window - the range of ideas acceptable to the political mainstream - will only be open and expanding so long. That's why there is great urgency for us to articulate a paradigm-shifting, popular vision of the future before reactionaries and investors begin to restore a shabby version of the Old Normal, this time with authoritarian inflections. Tories, Trumpism, and other nationalists around the world are already staking out this vision: a world marked by contempt for the rule of law, neglect of state services, political cronyism, market/state surveillance, and violent police responses to peaceful assemblies of citizens.

Since the political establishment has scant interest in pioneering transformative ideas, the burden falls on us, citizen-commoners. It won't be enough to hoist up a Green New Deal or revert to We need to hoist up new visions of human possibility. We need new types of quasi-autonomous infrastructures and institutions that cannot be co-opted by the market/state system.

That, in fact, is the strategic beauty of the commons, which I have studied for the past twenty years. The commons is a means of provisioning and governance that generally doesn't need the permission of legislatures or courts to move forward. We can do it now. It is not vulnerable to shifting political winds. It has deep roots in our human instinct for cooperation. And it represents a much-needed reconstituting of civil society as a space that creates value and legitimacy, a space that welcomes social empowerment, inclusion, and pluralism.

### Changing Our Inner Landscape

Our challenge is not just to rethink big systems, however. It is also about changing our inner realities as well. Despite our pretensions as moderns to be independent, self-made individuals, the coronavirus shows that we humans are actually profoundly interdependent on each other. An ecophilosopher Andreas Weber has put it, "**The corona pandemic makes us understand that the earth is a commons, and that our lives are shared. This insight is not a rational concept, but springs from an emotional need... Humans choose to put reciprocity first. Reciprocity - mutual care - is neither an abstract concept nor an economic policy, but the experience of a sharing relationship and ultimately of keeping the community of life intact.**"

So it's a bit misleading to say that the coronavirus is destroying the capitalist global economy. It's more accurate to say that it's destroying the epistemological edifice of the Enlightenment upon

which the separate from the collective. Mind and body are not distinct from each other. These conceits are simply, empirically incorrect.

Rebuilding the world won't just require new economic policies; it will require an entirely new *mindset* that recognizes that we, the Earth, and its systems are in fact alive. From this perspective, it's easier to realize that our societal institutions should not be geared for maximum consumption and utility satisfaction.' They should be about helping us achieve organic wholeness and integration, and intensifying relationality and reciprocity. New systems must take this into account by honouring bottom-up participation and ingenuity, and the idiosyncratic realities of where we live and specific ecosystems.

### **The Need for Institutional Innovation**

I've come to conclude that the discourse of the commons - in alliance with other alternative-economy movements - goes a long way toward helping re-imagine the institutions of governance and provisioning in the post pandemic world. It provides a language for both critiquing the severe deficiencies of capitalism while setting forward a philosophical and practical framework for building new organisational forms.

Crucially, the commons gets us beyond tired debates about socialism versus capitalism. Both rely on problematic centralized, hierarchical systems. Both are controlled by state power and its pathologies. The point of the commons is to open up new vistas for action and thought that can take us beyond the capital/ state alliance, rigid bureaucratic systems, and top-down, policy-driven approaches to change.

We should instead look to distributed initiatives that empower people. This can work to prevent the corruptions of consolidated power and help localise governance, thereby enhancing trust in governance. Trust is engendered when we honour bottom-up, peer-driven organisation, and innovation that gives people voice. It is nourished by Internet-enabled communing that can elicit collective energies, resources and wisdom. Here are some promising strategic innovations for moving forward.

### **Relocalisation for a Resilient Economy**

The pandemic has shown the-precariousness of global and national supply chains, not to mention the carbon emissions that such chains. require. We need to develop food supply chains that are more place-based, cheaper in their holistic operations, respectful of ecosystems, and resilient when disruptions do occur.

The activist academic Jose Luis Vivero Pol has argued that food should not be regarded just as a marketable commodity that should fetch the highest price, but something that affordable to everyone, nutritious and not profitable, and rooted in local economies. This requires that we privilege local agriculture, agro-ecological practices, and more equitable value-chains than we currently have.

### **"Cosmo-Local" production**

This is a system in which global design communities freely share and expand 'fight' knowledge, open-source style, while encouraging people to build the 'heavy' stuff physical manufacturing - locally. There are already a number of exciting examples of cosmo-local production arising for motor vehicles, furniture, houses, agricultural equipment, electronics, and much else. In agriculture, there are the Farm Hack and Open Source Ecology projects. For housing, there is the WikiHouse model.

## **Platform Co-operatives**

Internet platforms need not extract money from a community in the style of Uber and Airbnb, They can be vehicles for empowering workers and consumers, spurring their group creativity, reducing prices to quality of life. Platform co-ops succeed by mutualising market surpluses for the benefit of participant-owners.

There are now platform co-ops for taxi drivers in Austin, Texas (ATX Coop Taxi), for food delivery workers in Berlin (Kolymar:-2), for delivery and messaging workers in Barcelona (Mensakas), and for freelance workers in Brussels (SMart), among many others. There are also non-market platform co-ops such as freecycling and timebanking. Another variant is known as DisCO, the Distributed Cooperative Organization, a digital platform organisation that sometimes uses distributed ledger/blockchain technologies.

## **Commons-based Infrastructures**

These are important so that any individual commoner doesn't have to be heroically creative, and persistent. Infrastructure - physical, legal, administrative - provides a structure that makes it easier for individual commoners to cooperate and share more readily. It's a standing, shared resource.

One example is [Guifi.net](http://Guifi.net), a WiFi system in Catalonia, Spain, which has more than 30,000 internet nodes and functions as a [commons. Guifi.net](http://commons.Guifi.net) provides high-quality, affordable service that avoids the loathsome prices and business practices of corporate broadband and WiFi systems. Another interesting infrastructure project is the Omni Commons in Oakland, a collective property for artisans, hackers, social entrepreneurs, and activists that provides meeting spaces, programming, and community-outreach.

## **Dealing with the State and Finance**

A number of interrelated problems must be sorted out to assist the strategies above. The state has a creative role it could play, especially in city government but this is a complicated topic. How can the state become a constructive, non-intrusive partner with commoners in developing commons-friendly legal regimes and finance? One idea my coauthor Silke Helfrich and I discuss in our book *Free, Fair and Alive*, is commons/public partnerships as a way to recast the state's role toward commons. Instead of simply colluding with market players to privatization enclose commons, state power needs to-entertain was that it can work with commoners to authorize and extend their work.

This will require some rethinking of law and finance, however. Fortunately, there are already many hardy examples to build upon as mutual aid societies and insurance, crowd-gifting and crowd-equity. We can also community land trusts, CSA finance and co-operative finance. The larger challenge is to bypass the growth imperatives of conventional interest-bearing debt and shareholder equity and create community-supported pools of money (including alternative currencies) dedicated to communing.

The pandemic has revealed that neoliberalism is a fragile monoculture, wilting in the face of Covid-19's harsh biological realities the living dynamics of Gaia. Fortunately, the opportunities ahead are extensive, and can be expressed by the acronym TAPAS: 'There are PLENTY of alternative systems'. But we need to find ways to work together to develop these institutional models and communicate them inaccessible ways. We still have a lot of work to do, but much more has already been achieved than we may realise.