

## Introduction

### The Commoner - Issue 11 - Spring/Summer 2006

After ten issues, *The Commoner* makes the first timid steps toward changing format and organisation, towards making more explicit and visible the practices of cyber commoning it is grounded on. Watch this space, we are slow, but things will happen. Meanwhile, enjoy the edition that our two guest editors, Nate Holdren and Stephen Shukaitis, have put together, an edition in which the different contributions are traversed by the problematic of commoning.

Commoning, a term encountered by Peter Linebaugh in one of his frequent travels in the living history of commoners' struggles, is about the (re)production of commons. To turn a noun into a verb is not a little step and requires some daring. Especially if in doing so we do not want to obscure the importance of the noun, but simply ground it on what is, after all, life flow: there are no commons without incessant activities of commoning, of (re)producing in common. But it is through (re)production in common that communities of producers decide for themselves the norms, values and measures of things. Let us put the "tragedy of the commons" to rest then, the basis of neoliberal argument for the privatisation: there is no commons without commoning, there are no commons without communities of producers and particular flows and modes of relations, an insight we have focused on in issue 6 of this journal, entitled "What Alternatives? Commons and Communities, Dignity and Freedom." Hence, what lies behind the "tragedy of the commons" is really the tragedy of the destruction of commoning through all sorts of structural adjustments, whether militarised or not.

As the guest editors of this issue rightly point out, the question of commoning is linked to the question of "refusal of work," that magic expression used in the 1970s to highlight the frontline clash of value practices. The term, however, is not meant as a refusal of doing, of commoning, of (re)producing in

common, but on the contrary is an affirmation of all this in the only way possible when in the presence of a social force, capital, that aspires to couple its preservation to that of the commoners through the imposition of its measures of things. In these conditions, “refusal of work” as refusal of capital’s measures, and commoning as affirmation of *other* measures are the two sides of the same struggle. How can we refuse capital’s measure without participating in the constitution of other common measures? And how can we participate in this commonality without at the same time setting a limit, refusing capital’s measure? The setting of a limit to the beast and the constitution of an “outside” are two inescapable coordinates of struggle. It is through the problematic of this polarity that we could read the very diverse contributions of this issue of *The Commoner*.

Massimo De Angelis

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In June 2005, at the centenary celebration of the Industrial Workers of the World, historian and Midnight Notes Collective member Peter Linebaugh made a provocative remark in a talk about the commons. He said the World Bank also talks about commons.<sup>1</sup> An important difference in how we think about the commons, he suggested, should be that we pay attention to practices of commoning, as human activities. In light of this remark, we would like to suggest a gloss on the title of this journal. *Commoner*, not only as someone who dwells within and relies upon the commons, but also as someone who commons. To common: to produce and hold in common. Just as capitalist production has as its fundamental product social relations in the form of the capital relation, commoning produces social relations in the form of commons, freely associated humanity. It is in this sense that we want to link the commons with the work of Mario Tronti, linking commoning with the refusal of work.

What is the relationship between refusal of work and commons? Well, first, what do we mean by refusal of work? It has been noted before that ‘refusal of work’ is not simply ‘refusal to work,’ but it is refusal of the work relationship. Work has at least two moments: the purchase by the capitalist of our

bodies and time in the form of the commodity labor power, and the capitalist attempt to make use of our bodies and time after the purchase is made. Refusal of work spans both moments: the attempt to break out of the need to sell oneself as a commodity, and the attempt to resist or completely refuse being made use of if one has sold oneself.

How does this relate to commons? We see it this way: another name for the compulsion to sell labor power is 'enclosure.' And it is only within the enclosed spaces of workplaces (which, to be clear, for us include homes, classrooms - potentially any moment of life) and by resort to the violent mechanisms of enclosure that the capitalist can make use of us for surplus value production. The commons, then, in these terms is two things. It is a name for spaces, times, histories, memories, moments of life that are not - or at least not fully - enclosed, ruled by and functional for capital. It is the uses of our bodies and times that are different from and antithetical to the capitalist use. We do not only mean this in an abstract and utopian sense. The commons were constructed; the new commons are being constructed. Commoning is a process of organization. In a sense the commons are always already organized. They do not exist without organization(s), sometimes formal but more often informal.

The simple fact of producing the commons is a moment of refusal of the values of capitalism. Refusal of work is simultaneously an attempt to produce new commons, new forms of commoning (we can all point to relationships, memories, styles, images, and knowledges produced through our involvements in strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of refusal), an attempt to defend existing commons, and a use of existing commons to attack - or defend ourselves against - capitalism. If we do not have a type of commons in the social relationships with our comrades then our efforts are less likely to succeed. Stan Weir recognized this when he stressed the importance of informal work groups, and emphasized their empirical existence within important struggles.

This issue of the *Commoner* was originally intended to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Mario

Tronti's *Operai e Capitale*, a text which had an enormous impact on the Italian far left and whose influence is most present today in the work of Antonio Negri. Part of the project for we commoners is to analyze the facts and questions that Tronti posed: "How is the working class made, from the inside, how does it function inside capital, how does it work, how does it struggle, in what sense does it accept the system, in what way does it strategically refuse it?"

Our goal for this issue is a modest one: to show the continuing relevance of Tronti's work and to draw more attention to this neglected body of Marxist thought.<sup>2</sup> We expect that we are largely preaching to the choir when it comes to the readership of *the Commoner*. Some of the contributors to this issue have decided to directly engage with and develop Tronti's work at a theoretical level; others carry out inquiry into trends and practices within the global movements of commoners and of capitalism. While Angela Mitropoulos opens the issue by applying ideas from Tronti's writings to explore issues around immigration and autonomy, Ida Dominijanni closes it by exploring the relation between Tronti's thought and the feminist politics of difference. As Nick Dyer-Witheford explores connections between species-being and the specter of commonism, George Ciccariello-Maher begins to draw together a line of thought based on the logic of separation that connects thinkers such as Sorel, Tronti, Negri, and Fanon.

In exploring the connection between refusing work and creating new commons it is important to not give the impression that this is not a difficult or in some cases even impossible task, especially for those who are engaged in forms of caring and affective labor. For as argued by Alisa Del Re, to build a conception of utopia upon refusing work that does not take into account the labors of social reproduction most often carried about by females is to base one's notions of freedom on the continued exploitation of female labor. This issue is taken up by Precarias a la Deriva in their consideration of what form a strike from such constrained positions might take as well as a previously published article by Silvia Federici from the early 80s which elaborates on the revolt against housework that took

place during the 70s coming out of campaigns such as Wages for Housework.

What runs through all the contributions is the attempt to understand refusal and commoning in order to practice both better. To us, commoning and refusal are one and the same. Freely associated production of social relations is precisely the real movement that abolishes the present state of things. Refusal defends and produces the commons. Let us then, following the whimsical suggestion of p.m., hang golden globes all over marking points for the congealing of new planetary commons and revolt. The commons nourish and produce refusal. In the words of the IWW constitution, by the subversive practices of the global movement “we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”

Nate Holdren + Stevphen Shukaitis

<sup>1</sup> Peter Linebaugh, "Magna Charta and Practical Communism," talk delivered at the centenary of the Industrial Workers of the World, 2005. Those interested can find the text and audio of a similar presentation that he delivered to the "Contested Commons / Trespassing Publics" conference at Sarai in New Delhi here: [http://www.sarai.net/events/ip\\_conf/ip\\_conf.htm](http://www.sarai.net/events/ip_conf/ip_conf.htm).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of this writing, less than 1/3 of Tronti's first book and no other work by Tronti have been translated. Interested readers can consult the available passages online (<http://affinityproject.org/theories/tronti.html>), and a recent electronic discussion of Tronti ([http://www.long-sunday.net/long\\_sunday/tronti](http://www.long-sunday.net/long_sunday/tronti)).