

Dear Comrade/compañerx,

With this letter, we invite you to participate in the design, planning, support and administration of a new phase of *The Commoner* journal (www.thecommoner.org). We hope *The Commoner* can become a space (both virtual and in shared air) in which we put our energies together to think through different theoretical and pragmatic questions in order to strengthen and sharpen a radical perspective of post-capitalist transformation based on the commons, commoning and the development of a new common mode of production.

1. Commons, commoning and *The Commoner* in the new millennium

The Commoner web journal was born on May Day 2001, a year into the new millennium and just a few months before the counter-globalisation movement peaked with the mobilisation against the G8 in Genova, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the beginning of a frequently terroristic ‘global war on terror’ that lasted 20 years. At the time of its launch, *The Commoner* was the only radical journal that cast the commons as a terrain of contemporary anti-capitalist struggle and as a vehicle of post-capitalist radical social change. *The Commoner’s* project thus emerged amidst that fertile multidimensional wave of global struggles that recognised and challenged neoliberal enclosures: it opened up questions of emerging subjectivities, and posited novel imaginaries of producing, reproducing and relating.

In the global South neoliberal dogma had been challenged since its inception in the early 1980s, through waves of struggles – IMF-riots, for instance – against Structural Adjustment Policies. In Europe and the U.S., this wave of radical re-imagining and struggle began in the mid-1990s. The commons are nothing new, but their contemporary problematic emerged with global movements, from the Zapatistas onwards, as well as myriad local initiatives which have interconnected with this field of meanings and signifiers. It spread around the world in concentric circles, an enormous spiral, breaking the spell of Margaret Thatcher’s TINA (‘There Is No Alternative’).

The Commoner’s first incarnation lasted 11 years and counted 15 issues. It drew energy from these struggles just as it sought to understand and amplify them. It proposed analyses of the capitalist mode of production and its alternatives in which struggle and the construction of new worlds are the two sides of the self-activity of commoners. It understood that social transformation is the product of struggle, that social transformation passes through the double working of struggles and commoning, which construct new spheres of social cooperation at the same time as they set limits to capital, at the same time as they force capital to develop new strategies and tactics. It understood capital as a social force that persists only by imposing and enforcing a regime of endless and often meaningless work – both waged and unwaged – which,

in turn, requires capital to enclose, to divide, to stratify, to subsume, to extract and exploit people and the planet.

In these years, *The Commoner* developed a network of collaborators that met on numerous occasions, including a series of splendid week-long convivias in which we shared food, chores and thinking in the woods of the Italian Apennines or under the shade of Mont Blanc. After 2012 this network lost momentum and cohesion, some of its members dived into new projects, children started to appear or grow up, while other life demands began to make themselves felt. Thus *The Commoner* did not leave the scene with a bang, or a declaration, but entered a phase of hibernation. Meanwhile the capitalist world continued its wars, enclosures, deep divisions and catastrophic ecological destruction.

But struggles – including practices of commoning – never disappeared, of course. If anything, commons-oriented practices gained more relevance and greater visibility. In 2009, Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel prize in economic sciences “for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons” and the commons became mainstream. New literature in management and other disciplines spawned. But, importantly, commons were constrained within the straitjacket of profitability and capitalist markets and, as in Ostrom’s scholarship, these commons were largely populated by the selfish, ‘rational’ individuals – *Homo economicus* – of orthodox economic theory. In these literatures commons were, above all, complementary to capitalism and the capitalist state.

But alongside the mainstreaming of the commons, radical, anti-capitalist scholarship on commons and commoning has also blossomed. Crossing disciplinary boundaries, it has brought together commons in a variety of diverse projects, large or small, casting light on a multitude of projects seeking to reclaim the conditions of production and of reproduction, in territories, factories, offices, occupied spaces, clinics, fields and the streets. Commons discourse also began to shape the policies of state and municipal administrations with new insights and contrasting impacts.

The commons and commoning as organizational principle has become increasingly relevant in the constitution of struggles. Since 2010 and 2011, the Arab Spring, the “movements of the squares” and related movements have posed questions of social justice, recognition and democracy. These, we contend, can be understood through the lens of commoning – though it’s important to acknowledge that some militants involved in struggles we support explicitly reject the “commons” and “commoning” designation.

2. The crisis of capitalism now and the urgency for commons-based alternatives.

As we write in November 2021, we are in the midst of a pandemic and a de facto state of global emergency. We cannot doubt that the emergence of the COVID-19 virus and its global spread is a product of capitalism and, specifically, its extraordinarily aggressive expansion of the past four decades. Two sets of capitalist responsibility are highlighted. First, massive urbanization, industrialization, extraction, waste, hyperconsumption – in short “development” and “economic growth” – have stressed the boundary between capitalist social cooperation and non-human

natures has been stressed to such an extent that zoonotic virus transmission has become more likely. Second, once it made the leap to human beings, the coronavirus has spread so rapidly – ‘gone viral’ – because of the vastly expanded flows of capital and commodities associated with the neoliberal capitalist globalization of these decades. The coronavirus is thus a stark indicator that the hegemonic capitalist mode of production and social reproduction has made and is making the global social body sick. Capitalism is making *us* sick!

Of course COVID-19 is only one such indicator. In the past decades increasingly large sections of the social body have become increasingly – but unevenly – exposed and vulnerable to all manner of crises, various crises of social reproduction and the increasingly visible ‘slow violence’ of the unfolding ecological catastrophe. Such vulnerability is, in large part, a result of neoliberal enclosures – of cuts to health systems and social-security ‘safety nets’ of the past decades, the diffusion of divisive workfare programmes, and of the closing off of access to the land, rivers and oceans that have ‘traditionally’ sustained the lives and livelihoods of billions of people, as well as poor housing, air pollution, and industrial food systems that do not meet the needs of people. The increasing vulnerability is also inherent in the way of life promoted by these enclosures, that individualize subjectivities, that separate them through competitive pressure to adapt to new market requirements or risk losing the means of livelihoods, that socially reproduces the common conditions of our existence as an ongoing rat race that reinforces wage inequalities, ecological destruction, stress, and violence. The absurdity of this model of social cooperation matches the absurdity of wanting to keep it alive.

It’s obvious, not only to us, but to millions, that we need a radically different model of social cooperation. Processes of stratification and the concentration of wealth and power must be reversed. Social cooperation must be reorganized from below. Institutions must be created in which the decision-making process is from the bottom up. Moral economies of proximity must be established wherever possible, deep solidarity networks must be reinforced whether at the local or global level, and the obsession with economic growth (read capital accumulation) as panacea for all social ills in all places of earth must be cured.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted, as so many crises before it, the relevance of the commons when a crisis of reproduction hits. It has been thanks to the commoning of people around the world, mobilized in networks of solidarity and mutual aid, on a variety of fronts and geographical scales, that lives were saved or made more endurable in the face of uncertainty and hardship. We can only wonder whether this spur of solidarity may also open a scenario where the self-organised activity from below could energise a new phase of commons revival. The big challenge faced by capital today is how to govern an irresolvable clash between the needs of capital reproduction and the needs of social reproduction, broadly understood to include the reproduction of the bio-conditions of life. As capital drive to accumulation is embodied in forms of rationality that prioritize economic growth and profit over all other possible common purposes, everything becomes subordinated to it, every social circuit of production becomes commanded by it.

While we are writing, the ruling class is also busy planning. For the most part not denying the plurality of intersecting crises of ecology and reproduction that we face, the policies proposed

by ruling elites will perpetuate divisions within the global social body; they will perpetuate capital accumulation and command and thus perpetuate the violence done to us and our common Earth. To take the example of the climate emergency, carbon pricing and trading, the economic valuation of 'ecosystem services' and geo-engineering (all becoming part of a new elite consensus) will all deepen the commodification of our lives and make more dominant top-down and technocratic Imperial Science. In the words of climate and energy scholar Kevin Anderson, this '[mitigation denial](#)', i.e. a denial of the magnitude of the necessary changes to social relations, is 'now more damaging to our prospects than "climate-science denial".'

We draw hope from the fact that many scientists, militant scholars and activists are challenging this narrative, discursively and in the streets. Indeed a stance that was critical of capitalism, if not outright antagonistic, was near-ubiquitous amongst civil-society actors at the just-concluded COP26 meeting in Glasgow. Nevertheless, we believe it is important and urgent to create a platform in which to promote and problematise alternative forms of social cooperation – that is, approaches and experiences of social production and reproduction that are based on the commons at various scales. Commons, however – and this is one of their strengths – are heterogeneous. And since they are heterogeneous, since the common is not a given set of principles that can be applied uniformly, big questions emerge:

- How do we extend commons' reach without falling into command or wealth hierarchies?
- How do we translate experiences from any given commons across geography, 'sector' or type and/or scale?
- Is it possible to abstract from concrete examples to formulate and articulate general political and organizational principles? How? If such an abstraction is possible, is it desirable, i.e. politically useful?
- How do we build systems of socio-ecological reproduction that increase communities' autonomy and bargaining power vis-à-vis capital at different scales of social cooperation?
- How does a radical commons perspective help us to approach the "state", the question of the "law", and the current hegemonic private-public dichotomy?

In the context of these urgent questions, we believe it is time for *The Commoner* to wake up from its hibernation. **We would like to invite you to participate in this project of reconstituting *The Commoner*.** The project is yet to be defined in detail. Thus this invitation is also one to collaborate in such a definition. But, as a starting point, we can outline three initial basic elements (modifiable as people come in with new ideas):

First, a backbone of the new *The Commoner* is envisaged as the integration of blogger communities sharing commentaries, news items, videos and graphics. We envision them posting on themes that are relevant to and located at the frontline of radical commons: from art to food, from care to cyberspace, from ecology to housing, from the use of time to the use of space, from struggles and commoning in the workplace to struggles and commoning in territories, from local struggles to international movements, from reclaimed spaces to report on new strategies of enclosures, from . These diverse and plural posts would have the purpose of

keeping alive our collective sense of the plurality, diversity and evolving nature of commons – and the challenges they (that is, we) face.

Second, a revitalised peer-reviewed web-journal with a new editorial community, a network of associates acting as referees, and a larger networks of collaborators and contributors. We still have not worked out a final structure and organisation of the editorial board. Thus far the idea is that the steering group launching this initiative (that we like to call the “stirring” committee) take the lead and, with the addition of new members, eventually will morph into an editorial board. Editorial board members will also act as thematic and area editors to solicit submissions and organise thematic issues across *The Commoner* broader community.

We hope you would like to take part in this new phase of *The Commoner* as part of the commoner community. Please let us know whether you are interested in participating in this open project, and share your thoughts about this initiative.

All the best,

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