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On value and the commons

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Abstract

Approaches to post-capitalist commons often see them defined by value practices of sharing, reciprocity, solidarity and care in opposition to capitalist market values. This contribution draws on ethnographies of actually existing commons to propose a somewhat different approach to valuation in the commons. Commons are dependent for their reproduction on market valuations, so that it becomes impossible to define commons as social spaces based on their freedom from the market. At the same time, not all market valuations are necessarily capitalistic. Moreover, value practices often considered proper to the commons are not free from dynamics of inequality and power. Focusing on the organization of labour in the commons, this contribution highlights how unevenness might build on or newly create inequalities among the commoners. Consequently, limits to the commons – in terms of their capacity to contribute to post-capitalist transformation – might arise not only from an encroachment of an external capitalist system.

Keywords

Commons, commoning, labour, market, value

Commons scholars on the political left often see commoning as a path towards a post-capitalist future. The term is defined in varying ways, though it generally refers to egalitarian and democratic relations of co-production and co-use in relatively open communities. Especially what are known as 'new commons' (Bodirsky, 2023) – such as community gardens, cooperative housing, cultural centres, or (other) communities of care – are considered to prefigure post-capitalist social relations. The multiplication and

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networking of such commons is often seen as basis for a *social* rather than political revolution (e.g. Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis, 2017; Holloway, 2010).

Activist and academic discussions along these lines often proclaim that commons are 'beyond market and the state'.[1] They see commons practices of sharing or reciprocity as clear opposites to (capitalist) market processes.[2] Thus, a non-capitalist economy appears first and foremost as a non-market economy here.[3]

Massimo De Angelis (e.g. 2017) is a prominent thinker in this vein. He conceptualizes the commons and capitalism as distinct social systems that are based on fundamentally opposed value practices. While he acknowledges that capitalism and commons are at times nested in each other, and that there is interdependence, there lingers a sense of distinct social systems mapping onto particular social spaces.

De Angelis renders explicit what is often implicit in discussions of post-capitalist commons: commons are defined by values of solidarity, sharing, and care in opposition to capitalist value practices of commodification, exploitation, and accumulation. The limit to the commons here – in terms of their continuation and expansion – appears primarily constituted by an external, alien value system: capitalism perennially threatens to corrupt, co-opt, or enclose commons by integrating them into its value practices (e.g., Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis and Harvie, 2014; Flowers and Zeese, 2016).

I take issue with such assumptions in two regards. First, the fact that actually existing commons rely on multiple, intersecting modes of valuation is blurred when we distinguish social systems by respective values. Such modes include market valuations as well as hierarchical notions of social worth. Second, value practices of commoning are often seen as divorced from power, inequality, and exploitation. The ambiguities of practices of reciprocity, sharing, care, and solidarity that anthropologists have long analysed are frequently elided. While ethnographies often offer a more nuanced view of actually existing commons, widely read theoretical approaches to the commons tend to pick up anthropological concepts more selectively (e.g. De Angelis, 2017; Exner, 2021). As Susana Narotzky (2012: 245) has criticized, alternative economic relations such as of reciprocity and sharing are often taken out of their ethnographic contexts and rendered 'timeless' and 'morally good'. Such assumptions obscure the limits that might arise to the expansion of the commons from the value logics considered proper to commoning.

This contribution draws on ethnographies of actually existing (new) commons that play a role in everyday reproduction – without providing a comprehensive review – to complexify more general visions of commoning.[4] I also give examples from a network of community-supported agriculture (CSA) in Germany – the *Solidarische Landwirtschaft*.[5] Local initiatives in this network seek to reorient agricultural production and distribution along non-market principles. They are commoning projects with a defined membership, where all members contribute to a shared budget for production according to their financial means and receive an equal share of the harvest in return. Members voluntarily contribute to maintaining the commons through administrative tasks and labour on the fields. While some of the members have an anti-capitalist agenda, this is not the case for all of them.

A note on valuation

I propose treating actually existing commons not as value systems, but as social spaces where multiple modes of valuation always intermingle. By using the term 'valuation' (rather than values), I want to highlight the *processual* and *relational* quality of forming, attributing, and appropriating value both in more narrowly economic processes and in the formation of social worth (Bodirsky, 2021). While we can abstract from the complexities of social realities to get to distinct modes of valuation, it is problematic to then map these modes of valuation onto distinct spheres of social reality. Thus, the notion of valuation, as I use it here, does not presume congruence between a particular agent (such as a commoning initiative) and particular values. Rather, any such agent will always be formed within multiple, always already interrelated, and at times contradictory, modes of valuation. In that sense, it is also impossible to differentiate between external/alien and internal/essential logics of valuation, as notions of co-optation or corruption of the commons imply.

In this regard, my approach also differs somewhat from discussions of the commons that see them as defined by an emphasis on use value – in opposition to the dominance of exchange value in capitalist market practices (e.g. Ginn and Ascensão, 2018: 944; Nonini, 2017). While I concur with the thrust of this argument, which focuses attention on re-production versus profit as diverging goals of socioeconomic practice, I believe that the relevant category for capturing this is the concept of *surplus* value and its underlying relations of property, labour, and social worth. In a nutshell: market exchanges can, in principle, aim at exchange value without generating surplus value based on exploitation if they are primarily geared towards the reproduction of livelihoods of the market actor.[6] Initiatives that seek to establish non-capitalist property relations and market principles, such as some cooperatives, would be a case in point. This is relevant because it prompts us to take a closer look at *the kinds of* market valuations that play a role in the commons – and allows us to imagine post-capitalist futures where both commoning and alternative markets play a role.

This of course does not mean that market logics are necessarily unproblematic. All market relations – whether capitalist or not – make access dependent on financial means, often reinforce hierarchies of social worth and, for now, are enmeshed in a dominant capitalist market economy defined by relations of competition and exploitation. However, questions of (unequal) access and hierarchical social worth do not disappear with a market economy; they are also very much an issue as regards commons, which – from a property perspective – are distinguished from open-access regimes by a defined membership and thus exclusion (e.g. Bodirsky, 2018; Morrow and Martin, 2019).[7]

Last but not least, the appropriation of surplus value and hierarchies of social worth are not reserved for a capitalist society. Anthropologists in the Marxian tradition have long discussed relations of exploitation and hierarchy in non-capitalist social relations – often in their articulation with a capitalist mode of production. Terence Turner (2008: 45) thus envisioned for a Marxian anthropological value theory a 'comparative anthropological study of production (and thus a fortiori of *value*)' extending beyond an analysis of capitalism. As he argued with regard to the Kayapó, the (surplus) value amassed in a non-

capitalist context must not necessarily be of the material kind, but can also concern the relative worth attributed to persons, and in consequence, 'relative prestige and influence' in the community (2003: 13, 24–5). Thus, by extension, a perspective on multiple modes of valuation, including hierarchies based on gender, race, class, or other socially constituted categories, can help us develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of (surplus) value creation and appropriation in the commons.

Market valuations and the commons

Let us now take a closer look at the claim that commons are not systems separated from the market. On the level of practices of exchange, markets form a condition of existence and reproduction for actually existing commons. For example, urban commons contend with questions of rent, which connects them to financial markets (e.g. Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Huron, 2015; Noterman, 2016). In addition, commons frequently rely on market purchases and sales: not all necessary resources can be produced within the commons. For the CSA, this involves the purchase of seed, agricultural tools, or refrigerating systems.[8] Last but not least, commons depend on wage labour – directly or indirectly. Indirectly in the sense that funds used for the commons generally derive from wage labour (or, to a lesser extent, welfare payments). In the case of the CSA initiatives, the budget needed to fund agricultural production derives from individual payments from the members. A more direct dependence exists when commoning initiatives hire wage labourers to deal with the problem (discussed at more length below) that there are limits to how much unpaid labour can be shouldered by the commoners themselves. For example, some CSA initiatives have paid posts for administrative work; others hire seasonal wage labourers for work on the fields (see also Raj et al., 2024). While these labourers may receive an above-average hourly rate, that rate is still determined by a relation to a market price for agricultural labour; a market price, in turn, where the unequal attributions of social worth to migrant labourers in society aid the economic devaluation of their labour. That is, commoners indirectly benefit here from unequal modes of valuation based on class and nationality that pervade capitalist society and that, in this case, reduce their own costs of social reproduction via the commons.

While commons generally rely on markets, many commoning initiatives try to work with market actors who do not operate with a capitalist profit motive (see also Caffentzis, 2016: 69), or at least allegedly pursue similar social and ecological goals. Thus, CSA initiatives open accounts with alternative banks or cooperate with small organic farms to obtain agricultural products for their members that they cannot produce themselves. As the Hosaralmo Collective describes for Coop 56, a financial services cooperative in Spain, their goal is 'to operate inside … the market but with other values and principles than accumulation and growth; namely those for the reproduction of life in an expanded sense, based on the quality of work as the centre of the generation of value' (Hosaralmo Collective, 2019: 64). At the same time, they point out that initiatives such as Coop 56 are not autonomous from the capitalist market (Hosaralmo Collective, 2019: 65). Bruun's (2018) ethnography of a housing cooperative in Denmark shows that it matters 'what kind of market' commoning initiatives are involved in – while in her case, market elements

always played a role, it was only when financialized, neoliberal capitalism was given full rein by changing state regulations that a capitalist market rationality was encouraged and the housing commons (financially) undermined.

Market valuations also play a role in commons in the attribution of worth – be it to resources or to persons. This can be relatively harmless: in the CSA initiative, market valuations continue to appear in relation to the shared resource. Thus, commoners at times talked about the produce received in terms of price, a mode of market valuation that the CSA principle rejects. Some members pointed out that they might have received more or better produce by purchasing it on the market, which at times was a reason for leaving the initiative. Such market calculations within practices of solidarity and sharing become problematic when they feed into differential attributions of social worth. Thus, Andreas Streinzer's (2018) ethnography of an alternative currency in Greece shows how market rationalities pervade an initiative that seeks to provide an alternative to the mainstream economy by establishing relations of solidarity among the participants.[9] Notions of the 'good entrepreneur' justified the highly unequal ways in which different members could profit from the network. At the same time, obligations associated with reciprocity and notions of debt also engendered unequal relations within the community (Streinzer, 2018: 78).

Power and inequality in commoning

Some problems of power and hierarchy in the commons clearly have to do with their being embedded in a capitalist market economy. However, we should not assume that they could be solved by cutting ties with the latter and exclusively relying on value practices considered proper to the commons: reciprocity, sharing, solidarity, and care. As no anthropologist will be surprised to hear, those practices are not free from power. I want to approach such ambiguities here through a focus on the organization of labour (see also Bodirsky, 2018), which is key to the creation of (surplus) value and frequently manifests wider hierarchies of social worth.

By definition, labour in the commons is uneven, often with few commoners shouldering much of the workload while others contribute little (see e.g. Noterman, 2016). De Angelis (2017: 212) distinguishes between reciprocal and communal labour in the commons: communal labour being done simultaneously by the entire group (e.g. building a community centre), reciprocal labour in turn being based on 'circuits of reciprocity' or 'interchange of labour' (De Angelis, 2017: 217). Such uneven reciprocal labour can be seen as an aspect of lived solidarity in the commons. As Stavros Stavrides (2015: 16) notes, 'commoners of expanding commoning should realize that they often need to offer more than they expect to receive … and to contribute to commons tasks without demanding an equivalence among the individual offers'.[10] David Graeber (2011: 98) saw this as 'baseline communism', following the principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'.

An orientation towards uneven needs is often also an expectation in relationships of care. Thus Tummers and MacGregor (2019: 66, 69) point out that perspectives on caring relations in the commons run the risk of eliding 'gender power relations and the unjust

distribution of care', including the possibility of 'free-riding on the caring labour of others'. De Angelis, in turn, rules out that labour for the commons ever includes exploitation:

> Sophistry is not necessary to assuage our fear that commons may also become exploitative places. Labour is not always exploitation, while exploitation always is a particular amount of surplus labour. (De Angelis, 2017: 202)[11]

But isn't a bottom line of exploitation – or surplus labour – that one group can appropriate the fruit of the labour of others (see e.g. Turner, 2008: 45)? Unevenness in that regard can be connected to unequal attributions of social worth. Much of the labour in the commons has historically been done by women, as labour in the commons is associated with (feminized) reproductive and care labour (Federici, 2011). Other modes of inequality can also play a role. The abovementioned alternative currency initiative allowed unhoused people to use the quarters of the initiative, but at the same time expected that they would take over much of the physical labour for the commons (Streinzer, 2018).

Thus, pre-existing (de)valuations, such as of class, gender, or race, can shape the supposedly horizontalist labour relations of the commons. At the same time, lines of division might newly emerge from within such relations. Elsa Noterman (2016) describes an instance of what she calls 'uneven commoning', where a core group of a housing commons – grumblingly – took over much of the administrative labour, a task they felt they could not abandon without abandoning the commons itself as long as others didn't contribute. This friction had multiple layers: the core group appeared to many of the other commoners in turn as a kind of landlord. Thus, a perceived hierarchy emerged directly from relations of (uneven) commoning.

Here we must return to the issue of market valuations in the commons. The power dynamics that may be involved in the unevenness of labour in the commons are tied in with the fact that such labour is formally outside market relations and unpaid but, in fact, nearly always intertwined with wage labour. In contemporary societies, in particular in the global North, commons are usually only a complementary source of livelihood to wage labour. This has consequences for the experience of labour in the commons. On the one hand, it is often experienced as personally valuable because – in contrast to much wage labour – it is voluntary and takes place in comparatively horizontal relations (e.g. Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Fisher and Nading, 2021). On the other hand, what is initially and formally voluntary labour can turn into an obligation that is experienced as a burden when commoners are pushed and pulled between labour for the commons, wage labour, and reproductive labour in the household. Sometimes it is just too much labour all around. Who then contributes how much to what becomes an imminently political question.

Thus voluntary and unpaid labour for the commons can depend on a particular class position and relative freedom from reproductive labour, as studies of CSA, among others, show (e.g. Raj et al., 2024; Rossi et al., 2024). If one's role in the horizontal political relations of the commoning initiatives depend on time and labour invested in the commons, then an unequal share of say and influence (to echo Turner, 2003) might accrue to those with the freedom to labour for the commons. At the same time, those with secure

funds from wage labour are less dependent on the commons as a source of livelihood. Thus (unpaid) labour for the commons can turn into an obligation, especially for those who rely on the commons to a greater extent for their livelihoods and cannot easily switch to the market if commoning becomes burdensome.

Especially when mutual support systems of reciprocity are a necessity within capitalist relations of commodification and precarity, the obligations they entail are not always experienced as positive or liberating (e.g. Stack, 1974: 36, Palomera, 2014: S111–S112). Consequently, where people have a choice, they might at times prefer the impersonality of the market relation – because it seemingly comes with no (personal) strings attached. For example, Isabelle Guérin (2014) shows, in a study of micro-credit and informal debt in rural India, that women had to weigh financial costs against relative autonomy when choosing between them. Informal debt came with obligations, for example of political allegiance, which were at times avoided by means of the – financially more costly – impersonal obligation of micro-credit. Of course, the social relations implicated in this example are far from the egalitarian community envisioned for the commons. Nonetheless, in commons, too, obligation can be experienced as a burden, breed resentment, and lead to persons who can afford it choosing to cut unwanted social ties by returning to the market.

The extent to which uneven commoning is indeed a problem or a form of just distribution that takes individual differences into account – what Noterman (2016) calls 'differential commoning' – probably would have to be decided in each individual case. At least in more radical commons (that is to say, in initiatives that aim at societal change through prefigurative practices of commoning) there is awareness of the problem posed by informal hierarchies that exist despite formally horizontalist relations.

By way of conclusion

I have argued that multiple modes of valuation in commons projects are intertwined to such an extent that it is not useful to define such social spaces through one particular set of value practices. Moreover, a focus on labour allows for an investigation of possible lines of exploitation and hierarchy in non-capitalist commons. None of this means that we should abandon commoning as a practice for working towards a post-capitalist future. However, I suggest that this agenda of social transformation is not aided by treating the commons as fundamentally distinct from (capitalist) market valuations, because this primes us for looking for limits to the commons primarily in a capitalist outside.

The notion of limits is often invoked by Marxian approaches to characterize capitalist responses to crisis, where seemingly fixed limits are turned into barriers that can be passed in the quest for continuous capital accumulation (e.g. Harvey, 2010). In the case of commons, a different kind of growth is at stake: the multiplication and generalization of the commons for a post-capitalist future. Limits arise here where the commoning vision of egalitarian social relations cannot be realized and the continuity of the commons is at stake. An intrusion of market valuations into the commons is not the only source from which such limits arise. Rather, I suggested that contemporary commons are fundamentally reliant on markets, that not all forms of reliance on market valuations are

problematic, and that commoning practices of sharing, reciprocity, and care are not by definition unproblematic.

In fact, commoners are frequently aware of this and experiment with multiple modes of valuation to overcome limits to the commons. Let me share one last example from the CSA initiative, which involved a conflict concerning fair contributions to the shared budget. Members decide individually how much they can contribute to the overall budget, but receive an equal share of the harvest. As long as the budget is covered (because other members pay more) some individual contributions can be very low. The conflict involved a central contradiction: the community wanted to be open to members with few financial means, but a suspicion persisted that very low contributions were a form of freeriding. Members eventually settled on a compromise that involved setting a minimum amount that members had to pay for their share, while creating an alternative currency unique to the initiative that members could obtain in return for their labour and that a limited number of members could pay their share with. This was to make shares available to those with few financial means but, presumably, with time to labour for the commons. Not everyone in the group was happy with this because it seemed to be a reintroduction of a market principle, one that could cement a division between those required to labour for their share and those able to pay for it based on their income from wage labour. At the same time, it was a solution for several perceived limits: concerning criteria of inclusion (remaining open to those unable to pay), of reciprocity (everyone contributing to the extent possible), and of uneven labour (people contributing in different ways).

This might indeed be a strength of commoning: a constant working towards overcoming its limits, even as it re-creates them or produces new ones in the process. An anthropology of actually existing commons is well suited to contribute to a wider interdisciplinary study of commoning by highlighting such ambiguities and their implications for post-capitalist transformation.

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Notes

1. This claim goes back to Ostromian study of traditional commons as an alternative to private or state ownership of resources.
2. I will not engage here with the relation of commons to the state.

3. This is in contrast to studies of so-called traditional commons that also examined commodity-producing commons (see Caffentzis, 2016: 71).
4. This focus excludes studies on the role of commoning in urban social movements, such as in the occupation of public space (see e.g. Holston, 2019; Susser, 2017).
5. Initiatives in the network apply the same core principles but differ in the specifics (see Blättel-Mink et al., 2017). I have been involved with one initiative in the network but also have knowledge of others in different regions in Germany.
6. I posit here that not all forms of accruing exchange value are capitalist. Karl Marx pointed out in the first volume of *Capital* that the *Arbeitsprozess* (labour process) is universal to all social formations to ensure their reproduction (2017 [1890]: 192, 198). Marx posits that only in market economies does such a labour process produce exchange value; it is then a *Wertbildungsprozess* (a process of creating value). And only if this process of creating value is extended beyond what is needed to reproduce the worker, with the surplus produced accruing to the capitalist, do we find a capitalist *Verwertungsprozess* (process of valorization), what Marx calls 'a capitalist form of producing commodities' (Marx, 2017 [1890]: 209, 211) that is defined by exploitation. (I use the German terms because the English translation, here in brackets, lacks the parallel structure of the terms that marks them as interrelated concepts in Marx's usage.) Thus while capitalism requires the market for its particular mode of *Verwertung*, market relations are not necessarily capitalist, they can in principle stop at *Wertbildung*. Another way of putting this using Marx's terms is to say that not all market processes necessarily follow the money–commodity–more money (M-C-M′) logic. In this accumulation logic, the primary driving force of the economic process is surplus value. In turn, the C-M-C logic is the mode of existence for the worker who sells the commodity labour power (C) for a salary (M) to then purchase commodities (C) needed for reproduction. (Both M-C-M′ and C-M-C logics involve the simultaneous production of use and exchange value.) But it can arguably also determine the actions of what Marx called *kleine Meister* (small master) – such as craftsmen with a small number of employees who work alongside them and, through market sales, earn a livelihood that is only slightly better than that of their employees (Marx, 2017 [1890]: 326–7). The key point of such economic participation in the market is the securing of a livelihood (2017 [1890]: 326) and thus operates according to the C-M-C logic. We need to take these distinctions into account when we discuss the role of market valuations in the commons.
7. Theorists of post-capitalist commons discuss this dilemma (see e.g. Stavrides, 2015).
8. About half of the farms involved in CSAs in Germany also produce for the market (Blättel-Mink et al., 2017: 417).
9. While Streinzer does not discuss this initiative as a commons, it includes elements of commoning in relation to shared spatial and social resources.
10. Stavrides differentiates between 'expanding' and 'enclosed' commoning. 'Expanding commoning' seeks to achieve an egalitarian community open to newcomers and to difference.
11. While De Angelis sometimes acknowledges the possibility of oppressive commons, this insight does not inform his thought about post-capitalist commons, where power and inequality seemingly vanish.

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