
What does the path towards postcapitalism look like? In *Omnia Sunt Communia* (“All in Common”), De Angelis provides a comprehensive political economy perspective on how the commons framework can provide theoretical as well as practical tools toward building radical alternatives. This volume is an indispensable addition to the growing body of literature of the commons and has the potential to re-shape debates on commoning and societal transformation, both for academics and activists. Previously, De Angelis (2007, 2014) pointed towards commoning as the most promising process against enclosure whilst equally warning us against romanticising the commons and reducing them to stereotypes, as the solutions portrayed by each commons depend on particular situations. In *Omnia Sunt Communia*, De Angelis further elaborates on the importance of understanding the commons as social systems by brilliantly constructing concepts and merging theoretical approaches that are useful for those interested in how “bottom-up” emancipatory and ecologically sound social change can flourish.

*Omnia Sunt Communia* centers the debate by reminding us that those ever-increasing social inequalities closely linked to the accumulation of capital in the neoliberal project, as well as the catastrophic escalation of climate change, force us to find collective paths to exit the capitalist mode of production. De Angelis makes clear that he is also a commoner and not just a scholar. He thus joins Gibson-Graham et al.’s (2013) interest in community activism, which equally urges scholarship to engage with already existing forms of commoning, not only in order to explore their theoretical and practical proposals but also to visibilize their struggle and render academia more militant (see also Gibson-Graham 2012).

The book is divided into four parts: the first one exploring the commons as systems; the second examining the influence of Elinor Ostrom and Karl Marx in their approach to the commons; the third delves into commoning as the source of grassroots power; and the final section posits how this framework could bring about social change towards postcapitalism. However, far from being a solely theoretical resource, the book is bursting with practical
examples which ground how the author envisions the commons. For each topic the reader will find informative boxes providing deeper analysis of commoning situations (e.g. Greek self-organised health clinics, the Occupy movement, Cochabamba water commons) as well as tables and figures that summarize and clarify key concepts and theories.

The first section sets out the foundations for conceptualizing the commons as social systems and centers the discussion around the relation between capital and commons systems, which De Angelis stresses are never outside but rather situated systems produced in a contest of capitalist domination with values and horizons different from those of capital. His thesis begins by stating that common goods are defined by having a use value for a plurality which has to claim it and sustain it and is merely one of the elements co-constitutive of commons systems. He rejects delineating common goods into lists, arguing instead for the importance of looking at the relation between its components, actors and environments. Hence, to say that something is a common good is always related to is political context. Therefore, he is also critical of those who hail certain peer-to-peer online systems (P2P Foundation, free software and Bitcoin) as great examples of common goods. While there is a clear objective of sharing knowledge and information, he reminds us that such processes are all very much material and rely on capitalist processes of labor and have a considerable ecological footprint (e.g. a single Bitcoin transaction uses enough electricity to power 1.57 US households for a day). Therefore, he suggests our paradigms must also question the capitalist mode of production which makes high energy and raw material demands. De Angelis nudges the reader to focus on those commons systems that reproduce life such as food, housing, care and biodiversity, although he does not clearly state to what extent these online P2P systems could also contribute to the transformation of the commons.

De Angelis highlights that the commons should be understood as complex systems sustained by the constant interrelation of three pillar elements: [i] resources or commonwealth; [ii] commoners willing to share and pool; and [iii] commoning, i.e. the doing, praxis, performativity of the commons which is preoccupied by its reproduction and sustainability. He argues that the commons may occupy a social space and not just physical, grounding its practice in daily life and activities. He rejects the visions of other commons theorists such as Ostrom (1990) and Weston and Bollier (2013) for whom the commons is a
third sector, beyond the state and market. He argues that the “commons exist both outside and inside states and capital” (p.102) and are not only found in networks of care, squatted social centers or solidarity economies, but also within day-to-day practices in places such as universities, schools and companies at the heart of capital. But commons and capital, even though closely interlinked, are distinct, autonomous systems ruled by (often opposing) values and codes. Capital reproduces through accumulation and the commons reproduces through commoning – the social process of doing in common. This is why it is central to understand the commons as a social system, since its productive and reproductive capacity render it a social force of transformation. It is not a mere resistance to capital but an actual construction of systems that aim to contest it.

In the second part of the book, De Angelis lays out his differences with Ostrom’s approach to the commons and builds on Marx in order to construct his own. He criticizes the common-pool resources (CPR) approach which conceives the commons merely as systems for managing resources without problematizing the capitalist mode of production, the power imbalances and class struggles where the commons is inserted. He draws on Marx’s theory of surplus and on his understanding that the circulation of capital is essentially an endless one where the main feature of its dynamics is not necessarily the profit of any transaction but rather the “unceasing movement of profit-making” (p.181). Inspired by the way in which Marx developed his formula M-C-M’ for capital, De Angelis thus turns to developing one for the commons – the circuit of the commons.

Another important point is made in this section in regards to commoners as social subjects who are “engaged in the reproduction of commons and for which the relation to capital is often necessary, but it does not exhaust their social being and activity” (p.184). The author argues that there is a constant tension – elements of the commons as well as of the market in almost every productive aspect of modern life. Nonetheless, each system is clearly differentiated through its process, its values and goals, and it is the fostering of the commons and its (re)productive capacity which gives it the potential to contest capital.

For the author, commoning is the most crucial of the elements of the commons since it generates and sustains the system. Therefore, he encourages us to think about the commons as something that is always in the making. This idea of commoning was first put forward by
the historian Peter Linebaugh. Turning the noun “common” into a verb highlights that its very essence is not a mere theoretical concept but an active process which requires performance, a process which in turn carries a “promising but unspecified sense of an alternative” (Linebaugh 2010: 11-12). De Angelis gives a historical and anthropological account of how commoning as a form of social cooperation has survived for thousands of years throughout all civilizations, whose drivers and goals differ drastically from those of modern life such as profit and competition. He then develops concepts of communal labor and reciprocal labor, establishing useful categories for understanding commoning whilst providing tangible examples to illustrate his theory (e.g. the tradition of communal work or *minga* in Indigenous communities in Latin America, barn raisings in the USA, and the *saam* practice in Curaçao, to name a few). These examples from various societies are helpful to connect such theories to already existing practices; however, here the author might well be in danger of over-romanticizing certain practices in agrarian societies who themselves are subject to power relationships. Whilst it is important to draw on practices of commoning, one could stress even further the need to reinvent them in more progressive and inclusive ways.

Since commoning is a practice preoccupied with its (re)production and therefore its sustainability, one of its crucial features is autonomy. The commons seek to establish an autonomy from the values and goals of capital, which in turn generates new codes and values to abide to, and assures its own autonomous reproduction. Both capital and commons are in this sense two “autopoietically closed self-reproducing systems, systems that reproduce themselves through the renovation of their elements and the recasting of their relations” (p.242). But autonomy here does not mean that they do not interact; in fact, according to De Angelis they constantly do. However, each has different horizons, different goals and different practices, and both tend to their own (re)production.

In the fourth section, entitled “Social Change”, De Angelis draws on Marx’s argument that the social revolution – understood as a qualitative change in the social base, as opposed to the political revolution more aligned with Leninist approaches to seize institutional power – is the primary condition for overthrowing the capitalist mode of production and sustaining a viable alternative. De Angelis here disagrees with the Marxist narrative that the “proletariat” will defeat capitalism. Instead, his views are more in line with those of eco-feminism, council
communism and autonomism that defend bottom-up and more inclusive initiatives. These commoning initiatives ought to go through a process of multiplication and interweaving with each other if they want to contest the hierarchy of capital. Forming webs of interrelated commons forms common ecologies. De Angelis develops the concept of boundary commoning, where such common ecologies are created and sustained by a social force that “crosses boundaries, activates and sustains relations among commons thus giving shape to commons at larger scales” (p.287).

The author is skeptical about the relation of the commons with capital and the state, warning us that the latter have techniques to utilize commoning in their favor – what he calls the “common fix” when capital and the state use, rely on or even enclose the commons to fix the problems created by capital itself. He argues that there is structural coupling between both systems, manifested at times in parasitism when one system extracts value from the other. He seems to acknowledge that in the process of negotiation between commons and capital and the state there is leeway to advance the commons in particular cases (again providing useful examples and tables/figures), but that we ought to be careful about how much we should rely on capital and the state. Emancipation must be seen as a “process of growing commons powers vis-à-vis capital and the state” (p.358). Thus, rather than defining and prescribing a model for social change, the author encourages instead a climate for emancipation where variegated forms of commoning could flourish. De Angelis then urges us to trust the commons and to empower grassroots forms of self-organization which will create hybrids between social movements and commons, what he calls “commons movements”.

What De Angelis does in Omnia Sunt Comunia is provide the most solid account of the commons and commoning for it to be reclaimed as a school of thought for radical alternatives in times of climate change and rampant social inequalities. Throughout the book, and based on the tradition of autonomous Marxism, the author is developing a genuine language of the commons. As Marxism has developed a useful language to analyze capital, so De Angelis provides conceptual and practical tools, firstly to dissect what the commons is, and secondly to assist in drawing a road map for its multiplication vis-à-vis capital.

One could argue that the concept of the commons has been mis- or over-used, and in some instances even hollowed of political meaning. If we do not want the commons to
become the next “sustainable development”, we need strong theoretical articulations that point towards radical alternatives away from the enclosing power of capital. De Angelis’ book does precisely this in a timely manner. More than merely prescribing guidelines and setting the course towards postcapitalism, its formulation still provides the grounds from which the commons movement can grow and decide its own destiny without losing track of the horizon that should guide it. In sum, I would encourage anyone interested in conceptualizing and practicing emancipatory radical alternatives to seriously engage with this work which could well become a foundational text for the commons. Omnia Sunt Communia.
References


Xavier Balaguers Rasillo
Department of Economic Geography
University of Zurich
xavier.balaguersillassil@geo.uzh.ch

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