Commoning Social Life

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From our atmosphere to the open ocean, from our languages to the rule of law, use without ownership underpins human experience. It is critical to our continued survival beyond the Anthropocene. These resources and properties are ineluctably shared because they are not wholly appropriable; they are used as part of a commons because they cannot be entirely exchanged. They are held in common because they cannot be completely enclosed. This essay is concerned with the use of and care for the commons as an object of inquiry, a practice of all social life, and as the operative condition of intellectual production. The essay continues the 'Foundational Essays' series developed by the Institute for Culture and Society on basic concepts and approaches in social enquiry and practice. In the Institute, we treat 'commoning' as a key concept of our collective project.

In universities, a time-honoured commitment to collective production and open sharing across a knowledge-commons generates new findings and understandings — what is, ambiguously know as intellectual property. But the university functions as a maker of new knowledge only to the extent that cultural practices like collegiality, spirited debate and thoughtful exchange maintain the knowledge-commons as a space of shared use and distributed benefit. This example of the university clarifies the meaning of anthropologist Stephen Gudeman's paired maxims: *a community makes and shares a commons*; and *there is no commons without a community*. The practice of commoning must be ongoing and ever renewing, as Peter Linebaugh has pointed out. And this means that community, as Jean Luc Nancy has it, is always in the process of becoming.[2]

If research into the meaning of the commons is resurgent in academic enquiry, this is in large part a reflection of the way the idea has once more become relevant in daily life. Part of its contemporary power is that it offers a way of imagining and enacting a life outside the co-ordinates of private property, commodification and capitalism. It offers a way of making sense of both the dangers we face and identifying new forms of social organisation that make collaboration, co-operation and mutuality a more practicable reality. The unfolding ecological tragedies of the Anthropocene, from climate change to the sixth mass extinction, underscore the importance of thinking about how to share and care for what we cannot (or should not) own. At the same time, developments in peer-to-peer exchange services privilege access and shared use over outright ownership of assets (even if in many contemporary cases they are being skewed to reinforce inequitable allocations of wealth and power). Equally, co-productive approaches to managing common goods — from city infrastructure to health care — generate the conditions for common-concern in relation to collective wellbeing. In what follows, I begin by describing how the present common-concerns retrace earlier discussions, and how the concept of the 'commons' allows us to think and act in a complex world. Current research initiatives in the Institute for Culture and Society are used to illustrate how this concept allows us to think through the complex issues of urban space. This points to a still-broader application in a world that is sorely in need of an ethos organised around the concept of shared use and care.

COMMONING ACROSS THE AGES

Ongoing work in economic anthropology speaks to the long history of human communities engaged in commoning or shared use in one way or another. In the field of institutional economics, Elinor Ostrom's work on the management of common pool resources underscores the longevity and global diversity of commons management. In a recent book, social theorist Giorgio Agamben identifies the eleventh and twelfth-century monastic movement as a decisive point in the history of the idea of commoning. Central to the formation of the Franciscan order was a commitment to the practice of use without ownership or what was the religious practice known as 'highest poverty'. Monastery space was defined by the practice of highest poverty which was also referred to as 'poor use'. This community emerged at a moment in history where a precocious merchant class had arisen in Italy and where the Church was actively consolidating itself as a property-owning earthly power.

Agamben describes the terms of a debate between the newly established Franciscan community and Pope John XXII who was concerned with the theological integrity of the concept of highest poverty (and the threat that monastic communities posed to the Church). While the Franciscans argued for the possibility of life lived in the terms of highest poverty, the Papacy, pointing to simple consumables like food and drink, argued that this position lapsed into contradiction. Some things cannot be used without their essence being destroyed in the process, subject to a type of use he called *abusus* — using up the thing. From this the Pope John XXII concluded that one cannot live in the world without laying claim to some of it and for this reason ownership cannot be renounced. While a pragmatic compromise resolved the debate — the Franciscans could practice their form life in part by ceding ownership of the monastery to the Church — Agamben argues the Church's official position prefigured a world that privileges enclosure, positioning private property and private goods as inevitabilities.

But is the private ownership of property and goods the final word? Private property and privately consumed goods seemingly structure contemporary shared existence; individual ownership constitutes an ethos and form of life. Appropriating, holding, selling and buying private property and goods is widely believed to be what matters for many and it is hard to imagine how it could be otherwise. What would it mean to make use of something as opposed to owning it? The question that Agamben poses is this: 'How can use — that is, a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable — be translated into an ethos and a form of life?'[3]

2   S Gudeman & A Rivera, 1990, *Conversations in Colombia: the domestic economy in life and text*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; P Linebaugh, 2008, *The Magna Carta manifesto: liberties and commons for all*, University of California Press, Berkley.

3   G Agamben, 2013, *The highest poverty: monastic rules and form-of-life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. 145.

The Convento de Maria del Giglio in Bolsena, Italy[4]
Photo by Elizabeth Barron, 2013

Centuries have passed, and yet the terms of this debate and the possibility of use without ownership becomes relevant again in the present context. The chilling description of the consequences of the Great Acceleration by Will Steffen and his colleagues — anthropogenic climate change, ocean acidification, species loss and so on — show how swiftly seven generations of human activity have degraded those things fundamental to life that are not wholly appropriable.[5] Is it possible to change course? Is it possible that the use *and* care of those things — things we cannot enclose — can be transformed into an ethos and way of life? One possible answer begins, ironically, with a redeployment of the concept of *abusus*. If we reverse the terms of papal logic we might see that just as some things cannot be used without being destroyed, others can only

continue to be used because they cannot be finally consumed or enclosed. Rather than a cynical rationale for private ownership in earthly matters, *abusus* provides a compelling reason to learn how to use the world while caring for it.

In the present moment, the choice seems to be either to learn both use and care for the atmosphere, oceans and biosphere — that is to say, to common them — or to continue with the present pattern that we might describe, following Ethan Miller and Katherine Gibson-Graham, not as enclosure but as un-commoning. Un-commoning involves an abusive draw-down and degradation that changes the energetic, ambient and chemical qualities of air and water and in turn affects the bios, perhaps irrevocably.[6]

Learning to share what has been abused may indeed be an impossible task, but it is ours to shoulder. Part of what is required is precisely what Ien Ang described in last year's *Annual Review* as a process of assuming responsibility in a complex world.[7] If our choice is to learn to hold these things in common for the sake of continuity as a species (rather than progress) then the implication of the sociality of ownership needs to be reworked in relation to all that touches air and water, which is to say almost everything.

If we must share the world because it is not wholly appropriable, then it is time to turn our attention to the terms of this sharing — both the rules that govern use without ownership, and the practices that constitute this sociality. This emphasis on commoning can be opposed to broader trends in commons scholarship — for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's emphasis on 'the common' as a source of wealth expropriated through a process of capitalist primitive accumulation or Silvia Federici's decades-long exploration of commons as the site of social-reproductive

work and the historic and ongoing violence directed towards the commons and the women who use and care for it.[8] While understanding these dynamics are certainly important, turning our attention to concrete practices of commoning gives us the best chance of understanding *how* such a sociality of use without ownership might emerge.

COMMONING RESEARCH: RESEARCHING THE COMMONS

Our own research focuses on commoning as a set of social practices where the terms of access, use, and benefit as well as the exercise of care and responsibility for biophysical, intellectual or cultural commons are negotiated and shared widely across a commoning-community. Defined in these terms, the sociality of commoning can be contrasted with those of private property where the terms of access, use, benefit, care and responsibility are restrictive but not necessarily exclusive, and to the sociality of open-access where the rules of use have yet to be established. Understanding commoning as a set of practices enlivens new forms of scholarly inquiry, experimentation and policy intervention.

For the past several years, members of the Mapping Urban Resilience in Riverland Sydney (MURRS Research group) have developed the Cooling the Commons project. The team is documenting social-practice based responses to extreme heat events in Greater Western Sydney, home to one-in-ten Australians and an urban environment where extreme heat events involve sustained temperatures above forty degrees celsius. A central question is how do people stay cool when the automatic response to turn on the air conditioner in their private home is either not an option or too expensive. Working particularly with disadvantaged communities in St Mary's,

4   This fourteenth-century Franciscan monastery was, at the close of the twentieth century, home to one remaining Franciscan monk. The order agreed to share the space with members of *Punti di Vista* a collective of feminists, agro-ecologists and activist-academics so long as the space was cared for and remained open to pilgrims. The collective runs the space as a commons for the benefit of artists, academics and community members interested in sustainable development. Pictured here is the view out across the monastery garden to *Lago Bolsena* in a caldera of seven collapsed volcanoes.

5   W Steffen, *et al.* 2015, 'The trajectory of the Anthropocene: the great acceleration', *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 81-98.

6   E Miller & JK Gibson-Graham (forthcoming), 'Thinking with interdependence: from economy/environment to ecological livelihoods', in M Zournazi & J Bennett (eds), *Thinking in the world reader*, Bloomsbury Press Academic, London.

7   I Ang, 2016, 'Navigating cultural complexity', in H Barcham (ed.), *2015-16 Institute for Culture and Society: Annual Review*, University of Western Sydney, Penrith.

8   See M Hardt & A Negri, 2009, *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge; and see, for example, S Federici, 2012, *Revolution at point zero: housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*, PM Press, Oakland.

Penrith and Cranebrook, they have documented how people create and maintain the feeling of being cool. Among older residents they found a working knowledge of how to keep cool indoors without air conditioning — fans blowing air over trays of ice, wet sheets and shading windows. These residents were also the most likely to recognise and value adequately shaded park spaces with water that made them several degrees cooler than the surrounding environments. This know-how constitutes what they term 'a residual commons', one whose continuity depends upon both the intergenerational transmission of practices and policy that conserves cool green spaces. Among younger people the team noted instances of 'transgressive commons', which involved the illegal occupation of private water features, or use of commercial spaces for long periods of time to take advantage of cooling in these spaces. Finally, In the course of focus group conversations in each of these places, there emerged an aspirational cool-commons — ideas about what could be done on footpaths, or in parks or play grounds, with shade sails and the right trees to make city-spaces in the west cooler and more pleasant.

The results of this study have been circulated as a Research Working Paper to councils throughout the region as a prompt and inspiration for further partnerships and co-designed research interventions. In the process, each of these sets of social practices — residual, transgressive and aspirational

commoning — create a knowledge commons, made more robust through the sharing. We might, following Paul James from last year's Annual Review, see these three forms of commoning as ways of expanding our social capacities for vitality, relationality, relationality and sustainability.[9] We could be bolder and represent them parsing different forms of a politics of commoning. First, there is defending and maintaining the capacity for being cool (what has been commoned) and spreading the word, sharing the knowledge commons far and wide. Second, there is the partial transgressive commoning of private spaces to obtain cooling — widening the restrictive terms of access, sharing use and benefit of the previously enclosed. Third, there is anticipating with others new ways of increasing cooling with open-access resources, working to establish principles including the terms of responsibility and care.

Commoning renders explicit and politicises the rules that govern access, use, benefit, care and responsibility. The principles that the Cooling the Commons project has applied to tangible spaces like parks as well as intangible things like shade can be applied elsewhere. For example, communities around the world are grappling with the question of how to govern rapidly proliferating platform-based peer-to-peer systems that provide lodging, transportation, financial services and house-cleaning. Amongst the many positive benefits of this process, we need to also delineate a fourth orientation of commoning — what

might be called 'abusive communing', where a rhetoric of common use overlays relations of platform-based exploitation, taking advantage of people in precarious employment who want to supplement their income. The politics of commoning allows us to specify what the technology of peer-to-peer exchange has disrupted, as well as what it leaves intact. On one hand, contemporary regimes of commoning such as Uber have enabled greater access to and use of privately owned vehicles. On the other, they have introduced proprietary sharing systems that concentrate ownership and power through a rhetoric of 'sharing'. While platforms like Uber promise to reduce demands upon city infrastructure, cities such as Sydney are left to figure out how to make sure transport services remain available to people with disabilities, how to ensure safety, and how and whether to collect taxes on this emergent sector.

Legal theorist, Janelle Orsi points out that this disjuncture between access, use and ownership could be pushed still farther apart. Platforms such as Uber and Airbnb have concentrated enough wealth from consumers through independent providers to have market valuations of over forty billion US$ after a few short years of existence. In San Francisco and other cities these platforms have distorted the local political process in their attempts at resisting taxation and regulation.[10] On the other hand, as Orsi points out, this same technology could allow for the generation of a commonwealth of co-operative use.

Access	Use	Benefit	Care	Responsibility	Ownership
Narrow	Restricted by owner	Private	Performed by owner or employee	Assumed by owner	Private individual Private collective State
Residual Commons					Private individual
Shared and wide	Negotiated by a community	Widey distributed to community and beyond	Performed by community members	Assumed by community	Private collective State Open access
Unrestricted	Open and unregulated	Finders keepers	None	None	Open access State

◀ Aspirational   Transgressive ▶

Figure 1.
Cool Commons.

9   P James, 2016, 'Creating human capacities', in H Barcham (ed.), 2015-16 *Institute for Culture and Society: Annual Review*, University of Western Sydney, Penrith.

10 J Orsi, 2016, 'Platform cooperativism', *Creatives get mutual*, Vivid Festival, Sydney.

Platform capitalism could be replaced by co-operatively owned alternatives where a portion of the wealth generated through transactions would be distributed to producers and even consumers.

Michel Bauwens and Vasilis Niaros draw on examples from the tech-world's peer-to-peer economy to trace the way that new forms of transparent electronic currency, new collective decision-making platforms, and new legal agreements such as the commons-based reciprocity licence, may work to extend the reach of commons-based enterprises, in part by shoring up the terms of shared use. In the case of peer-to-peer organisations of the sort that Bauwens and Niaros describe, the shared use of digital technologies constitutes a commons that makes possible new commercial activity while repositioning the relationship between commerce and commoning practices.[11]

The co-operative organisational form is nothing new, but platform technologies like those described by Bauwens, Niaros and Orsi make visible how the co-operative enterprise form sits in relation to the larger society. We could follow Adam Smith's contemporary Antonio Genovesi and use the term 'commonwealth' as a new way of understanding how markets (can) function as spaces of sharing and mutuality.[12] In turn this might give rise to other forms of social transformation. For example, in prior work, we have argued (with others) that the emergence of solar power technology in Australia has worked to reshape energy markets and led to the formation of new political constituencies

(such as Solar Citizens), all the while working to constitute and care for a global atmospheric commons by pushing along the development of a less carbon-based energy system.[13]

The politics of commoning can be stretched even further. In the health-care sector co-productive approaches are receiving widespread attention and these can readily be understood as a commoning practice. From a commoning perspective, understanding care as a process that involves both professional and informal providers, as well as patients themselves, along with a broader environment of public and private institutions, reconstitutes care as a commonwealth. It prompts new thinking about the plight of the vast majority of care-workers labouring in elder- and child-care under difficult conditions for low-pay. There is already evidence that establishing co-operative enterprises in this sector has positive implications for the health and wellbeing of care-providers and the people for which they care. Given that the number of elders globally will climb to more than two billion by mid-century these sorts of ongoing experiments in how to meet their care-needs is of central importance.[14]

Governments in some places are beginning to use this same principle to co-manage public property and resources. Gay Hawkin's ongoing work on water-as-a-public good draws attention to the relationship between public infrastructure and the shared-trust required to maintain it.[15] To be sure, some of the new forms of shared-use such as ride-sharing platforms like Uber are highly problematic, evolving faster than they can be

regulated. Their relationship with the state and society is yet to be worked out, and they can be the site of new forms of social exclusion. The integrity of other commons, particularly biophysical commons, seem to hang in the balance in locations throughout the world.

Academic research can play a vital role in working with city and state governments, communities and industry, to explicate and call into question the terms under which we access, use, share and benefit from a commons, as well as the terms of by which we take responsibility and care operates. Our Institute's capacity to participate in this process, like the academy as a whole, is predicated on both the use and care of university-space as a knowledge commons. For St Francis, the monastery existed as a space of common-life only to the extent that the rules that governed every hour of that life were expressed fully in the recitation of psalms, reverential silence, collective work, worship and contemplation. As in the monastery, here in the university we practice our own form of common-life that includes the regular recitation of challenging seminar papers, the sharing of our meagre weekly lunches, the reverential silence that accompanies writing, and the collective work of grant getting and administration.[16] As in the monastery, these practices create a space that could only be in the world on the basis of sharing it. Our Institute similarly is a shared space of sustainment that nourishes us to advance the agenda of commons research in this troubled world.

11 M Bauwens & V Niaros, 2017, 'Value in the commons economy: developments in open and contributory value accounting', P2P Foundation, Chang Mai.

12 L Bruni, & R Sugden, 2008, 'Fraternity: why the market need not be a morally free zone', *Economics and Philosophy*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 35-64.

13 JK Gibson-Graham, J Cameron, & S Healy, 2016, 'Commoning as postcapitalist politics', in A Amin & P Howell (eds), *Releasing the commons: rethinking the futures of the common*, Routledge, London.

14 RA Matthew, & V Bransburg, 2017, 'Democratizing caring labor: the promise of community-based, worker-owned childcare cooperatives', *Affilia* vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 10-23.

15 G Hawkins, E Potter, & K Race, 2015, *Plastic water: the social and material life of bottled water*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

16 See Louise Crabtree's essay on Impact on page 26 of this report for a principled consideration of how we are called to both account and care for the academic-commons.

Image taken by Andrea Del Bono shows the roots of a plant growing out from a block of concrete in a laneway in Singapore