



Destaque Semanal

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism refers to the conviction that all Africans and descendants of Africans in the diaspora share a common history, common interests and, ultimately, a common fate which thus(...)

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Commons

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In the last decade, the commons has become a keyword in environmental governance and political ecology, especially since the Nobel Prize went to Elinor Ostrom in 2009. At the same time, the commons has come to mean different things, depending on the theoretical approach used. What these approaches tend to share is an interest in – and often a celebration of – the commons as an alternative form of governance beyond the state and market economy. Traditional commons studies have focused on fishery, forestry, irrigation, water management and animal husbandry. In recent years, biodiversity, climate change, or digital resources have emerged as relevant in the study of the commons. In the context of increased socio-environmental conflicts around the world, the commons have also been placed on the political agendas: indigenous and peasant communities protecting their land, urban collectives defending public housing or urban gardens, as well as digital platforms demanding knowledge sharing.

From the mainstream perspective of “institutionalism” explained by the theory of Ostrom, the commons are understood as common-pool resources, a type of economic good which can be collectively governed for competing uses. When Hardin’s famous “Tragedy of the commons” stressed the inevitability of collective abuse of the commons, he was basically ossifying these in dualisms such as ‘state’ versus ‘market’, rational versus non-rational, good versus bad human nature. Ostrom criticized Hardin, inspiring a cohort of researchers to analyse the collective use of commons on a case by case, and thus, producing the famous institutional Design Principles for the sustainability of collectively-governed commons (1990). For Ostrom, increased cooperation in collective action implied setting up clear ‘boundaries’ of a community: smaller sizes, homogeneous identities, people who ‘share a past, and expect to share a future’ (Ostrom, 1990: 88). While she emphasized that resource users could

overcome pure self-interest to include interest of others and long-term considerations, she still operated within the main assumption of rational choice commoners, inevitably reproducing the bias of autonomous and utilitarian subjects. Most studies take this Ostromian institutionalist perspective despite ambiguous albeit uneven power relations at work in the management of commons. Adopting, communicating, and renegotiating norms such as 'trust and reciprocity' - guiding principles of the institutional theory - have not accounted for the structural tendency to enclose commons for commodification: the statist-like (homogenous, narcissistic, and patriarchal) as well as market-like power relations within common-property regimes. The verb 'commoning' was proposed as a means to indicate the difficult dynamics of taking care of commons collectively.

Critical scholars have focused on the history of the commons as a tragedy of colonial enclosures or 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003) and the dialectic of enclosures with collective struggles to re-claiming the commons (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis, 2013). Such critical turn in the study of commons has been necessary to dismantle the rather apolitical approach of institutionalists. Therefore, the common(s) are contextualized better within such historical struggles for a more just communal way of life based on collective responsibility and cooperation among earthly beings. Daily taking care of degraded forests, fisheries, community land, are few examples of struggles of 'being-in-common' in a capitalist economy that has increasingly prioritized individual, short-term, material profits. Hence, commoning and the re-claiming and re-producing of commons are viewed as part of on-going emancipatory transformations for a future society centred around democratic and equalitarian socio-political relations of commoning 'with/in the earth' (Tola, 2015). However, political subjects are ambiguous effects of power: agency is located at the tension of 'within/against' power, which indicates the relational struggle to constitute both selves and our common lives in collectives. What gives 'natural' appearance to our subjectivities (e.g. the selfish egoist, the 'rule-breaker' or the solidary commoner) is a naturalized politics, which often denies historicity. Therefore, critical perspectives on the production of 'commoners' as political subjects are crucial. Future research on commons could benefit by taking as a starting point the constitution of 'commoner' political subjectivity by hegemonic (capital-state) powers. The potential of commoning counter-hegemony is not related only to nurturing particular norms or subjectivities, but to performing more just and equalitarian relations of being-in-common, mutually bounded and vulnerable.

References and further readings:

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- Tola, Miriam (2015), "Commoning With/in the Earth: Hardt, Negri and Feminist Natures", *Theory & Event*, Vol. 18(4).

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Como citar

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