

<AB>What does it mean to say no to a capitalist social system that has the power to put life to work for its own development and, in so doing, shapes subjectivities, horizons, architectures, urban and rural spaces, life rhythms, ecologies, and polities in its own image? This question arises with particular urgency in the midst of one of the deepest capitalist crises, with its catastrophic social and ecological consequences. This article argues that the answer to our question resides ultimately in a particular type of social power, one that recomposes the social practice of the commons to achieve autonomy from capital, especially and initially in matters of social reproduction (food, health, care, housing, knowledge, and education). </AB>

<TI>Social Revolution and the Commons

<AU>Massimo De Angelis

<A>On Coevolution

In the “noes” written on the banners of many struggles, what is often contested is a particular instantiation of the social system we call “capital,” a particular attempt to extend its reach. Or it can be the “fuck off” shouted with irreverence to politicians who through their policies, inaction, or client networks appear as gatekeepers and representatives of a “system” the functioning of which affects our livelihoods and hopes.¹ Enclosures are one crucial aspect of the range of strategies to develop capital as a social force of disintegration and exploitation.

In my book *The Beginning of History* (De Angelis 2007) I bring enclosures, accumulation, and class struggle together in one framework through the analysis of value struggles. I show, for example, that enclosures of commons are a necessary process of capitalist development and that they are a continuous and recurrent feature of political economies centered

on capital's growth and corresponding social relations. It is not just that accumulation may occur as "accumulation by dispossession," as in David Harvey's (2003) formulation. It is that the dispossession of life-time (i.e., labor exploitation), operated by capital through its systemic feedback loops pitting workers against others, can sustain itself only through periodically dispossessing alternative means of social reproduction and destruction/decomposition of corresponding communities. What additionally became clear was that capital also seeks to enclose commons that were in fact *created* under the impact of past struggles. The "double movement" of enclosure and commons creation therefore expresses somehow the historical rhythms of the class struggle within capitalism.²

This approach also opens up many questions, especially if a fundamental social transformation is desired. Indeed, what this approach makes clear and builds on is the coevolution—once called "dialectic"—between capitalist development and working-class struggle. This relation has been fundamental in Karl Marx's work and various strands of autonomist Marxism, but less so in traditional Marxism, which instead projects social change onto the autonomous development of the forces of production, vulgarly understood as "technology." Within what Harry Cleaver (1979) loosely calls autonomist Marxism, this relation between working-class struggle and capitalist development follows cycles of struggles in which the phases of class composition set the tempo. These involve mostly the phases of political recomposition (when the divided working class comes together and builds a movement) and decomposition (when under the hammer of repression and capital's restructuring the social composition of the working class, upon which those struggles were founded, changes, weakening the movement itself). Once we move to develop this approach to take account of broader questions of the development of forms of capitalist governance (like the evolution of

Keynesianism and neoliberalism), and the political economic conditions of accumulation (conditions of profitability), it sheds light on capitalist development as the phenomenology of class struggle. However, *how would this ongoing relation between struggle and capitalist development lead us to a new world, when capital has demonstrated again and again its ability to co-opt, destroy, and decompose the social basis of its class enemy and in so doing generate its own development?* Isn't this coevolution between struggle and capitalist development really endless? How then can an "association of free individuals" come to replace capitalism as the dominant mode of production?

<A>Social and Political Revolutions

We face here a methodological fallacy, one of three that I discuss in this essay. The first is the *fallacy of the political*. This is the idea that a political recomposition could generate and sustain, through any sort of *political representation*, a radical change in social relations and systems of social reproduction. My stand is that political recompositions are certainly necessary to create *momentum* for change by initiating chain reactions of sociality and channeling social energies into particular objectives and directions with efficient thrust. In this sense, phases of political recomposition and the corresponding forms of political representation are important for opening up opportunities for the radical development of new social relations and systems. However, in themselves they do not radically change the capitalist social system into something else: they can only *perturb* it.³ Capital reacts and adapts to these perturbations, developing new forms, absorbing, enclosing, channeling, redividing within the wage hierarchy, co-opting, and repressing, and the mix of these will depend on the cost-benefit calculus in given situations. Keynesianism and the welfare state as developed in the post–World War II period (De Angelis

2000) is a case in point.

Recognizing the *fallacy of the political* gives priority therefore to a conception of radical change, of “revolution” aligned to Marx’s conception of *social* revolution (rather than to V. I. Lenin’s *political* revolution).⁴ In the first place, a social revolution is not the “seizure of power” engineered and led by a political elite (whether through reformist or political revolutionary means), but the actual *production* of another form of power, which *therefore* corresponds to the “dissolution” of the old society and of the old “condition of existence” (Marx and Engels 2005: 25) or to a change in the “economic structure of society” that is constituted by “the totality of the [social] relations of production” (Marx 1977: i). Second, precisely for its characteristics of being constituent of new social relations reproducing life (and dissolving old relations), social revolution cannot be reduced to a momentary event, a “victory,” but is epochal and configured by a series of “victories” *and* “defeats.” Marx thus speaks of the “beginning” of the “epoch of social revolution” (Marx 1977: i), but how long is this epoch, no one can say. This distinction between social and political revolution does not imply that social revolution is not itself “political.” Social revolution is political in the sense that it acts as a crucial perturbation of established dominant systems and poses the socioeconomic basis for a new polity, for new forms of governments of networks of social cooperations.

<A>The Commons

This priority of social (rather than political) revolution also implies that to bring about radical transformation we do not need to have a worked-out system to replace the old one before dreaming of or wishing for its demise. Quite the contrary, and, indeed, this is the second fallacy that I think underpins discourses on radical social change. The *fallacy of the model* is the

widespread idea that to replace the current system (model), another system (model) needs to be ready to take its place. Unfortunately, history does not work this way. Alternative systems can certainly be imagined and problematized, but it is not through their “implementation” that the history of the modes of production occurs. Systems are not implemented; they *emerge*, and their emergence occurs through the related processes of social revolution and political revolutions, with the former creating the source on which the latter draw their power to perturb existing political systems and develop alternative ones.

Social revolution is ultimately a process of finding solutions to the problems that capital systems cannot solve (most likely because they have been generated by them). This process implies the establishment of multiscale systems of social action that reproduce life in modes, systemic processes, social relations, and value practices that seek an alternative path from the dominant ones and are able to reproduce at greater scale through networking and coordination. What the various movements of the past few decades have made increasingly clear, from the Zapatistas in the mid-1990s to the Occupy movement in 2011, is that whatever alternatives were put forward by an idiosyncratic section of a movement—whether micro or macro, whether participatory budgets, a reconfiguration of social spending by the central state, transition towns, renewable energy cooperatives, self-managed factories, noncriminalized cyberactivism, a defense of traditional communities along a riverbed threatened by enclosures, general assemblies, self-managed public squares, and so on—they all depended on some form of *commons*, that is, on social systems at different scales of action within which resources are *shared* and in which a community defines the terms of the sharing, often through forms of horizontal social relations founded on participatory and inclusive democracy. These two elements of commons emerge through concrete life practices developed on the ground.

Commons' value practices are quite distinct from the value practices of capital, and they reproduce and develop the social power necessary to sustain and give form to the commons system. This social labor and the corresponding forms of cooperation that are located within commons and that (re)produce them is called "commoning."

The relation between social and political revolution is thus the relation between the social systems that underpin them, that is, between commons and movements, and I suggest that we take Marx's warning about radical transformation beyond capitalism seriously, when he says in the *Grundrisse* that "if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations . . . prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic" (Marx 1973: 159).

Commons are these concealed, latent material conditions in which a classless society *can* be given form. In fact, commons are latent within society and channel all the support and resources through which we reproduce our lives and knowledge. We are generally born into one, even if it consists only of interactions with our parents or carers and siblings or friends. As soon as the process of socialization begins, we reproduce our subjectivities in bodies and spirit through engaging in networks of social cooperation that confront us with the need to develop value practices and measures that are truly alternative to the subordination of life to profit or that push us to learn to adapt to it while keeping a distinct identity.⁵ As soon as these networks of social cooperation develop into systematic patterns, we have all the elements of commons: a pool of resources, communities, and commoning. Given the development of communication and information technologies, these commons-based forms of social cooperation have the potential to expand and destabilize their boundaries, renew their social compositions, and develop multicultures of horizontality.

In this way, commons cannot be reduced to the stereotypes of commons theories, and they do not have a glove fit with *any* model put forward by any romantic or radical versions of what constitute good or socially just systems. We do not have to fall into the fallacy of the model. To modern cosmopolitan urban subjectivities, many contemporary urban or rural commons are often messy, disempowering, claustrophobic, patriarchic, xenophobic, and racist. These are obviously not the commons we want for an emancipatory perspective. The *strategic intelligence* we need to develop should really indicate how to circulate and amplify the resistance and struggles against all these traits, which are located in many commons. But it would be dishonest and dangerous to select these out of our theoretical radar just because they are not desirable characteristics of the commons we want. The more our “postmodern” condition facilitates subjective nomadism (to escape relationships, jobs, places to live, group identities) and communication, the greater are the opportunities to escape the entrapment of these reactionary commons. People do this all the time. However, although nomadism and communication allow subjectivities to change their *situations*, they do not necessarily change the social systems through which subjectivities are articulated, and they do not prevent these reactionary traits from reemerging in new social systems.

So, for example, in many parts of Africa, women are escaping the commons while demanding land reforms to change communal practices embedded in customary laws that have often discriminated against them, with respect both to land inheritance and even to land use. In these commons only men have control over land, and land rights are required for empowerment and providing livelihoods for their children. The risk, however, is that “this movement can be used to justify the kind of land reform that the World Bank is promoting, which replaces land redistribution with land titling and legalization,” unless of course the demise and/or failure of a

patriarchal form of commons is met with “the construction of fully egalitarian commons” learning from “the example of the organizations that have taken this path, like Via Campesina, the Landless Movement in Brazil, [and] the Zapatistas” (Federici 2008: 13–14). Reactionary traits, however, can easily resurface even in “politically correct” commons as soon as commoners seek shortcuts to decide questions of a system’s boundaries (e.g., who is part of the commons?), of the division of labor, and of the distribution of payoffs or have to deal with the perceived free riding of one group of commoners and so on.

The solutions that commons can offer to tackle problems depend obviously on particular *situations*, on the specific cultural mix of existing communities, for example, and on particular resources available for pooling. However, in a situation in which capital and commons are both pervasive systems that organize the social, it is clear that often a solution *will* imply a particular deal between these two, that is, a particular form of their structural coupling. If together with others I set up workers cooperatives to sell commodities on the market to provide a form of income to a community, and I ground this on horizontal participation and self-management, I still have to meet particular standards, to use money; I enter particular institutions that are given to me. In addition, I will have to engage with the problematic of profitability (of competitiveness, of efficiency, of cost minimization, etc.), a problematic that frames my competing commons (co-op) *also* as an individual capital system articulated to others via the market, and this *in spite* of the social objectives and value practices of the co-op.⁶ Any contemporary *institution* located within broader fields of social relations, therefore, is the realm in which structural coupling between quite different social systems (commons and capital) present themselves in particular forms.

Is the recognition of “deals” with capital a step toward selling out? One in fact could

argue that from the perspective of true radical transformation beyond capitalism, the problem is the deal, because the function of every deal *for* capital is to allow its reproduction as a social system. While formally true (deals do allow the reproduction of capital), this position fails to recognize that social reproduction (in households, communities, or “services” such as care, health, and education) is to a large extent at given times also coupled to the reproduction of the capitalist social system. This means that deals with capital also make it possible to reproduce life *in given circumstances*. Therefore, for the commons understood as a social force of transformation, whatever deal we are able to cut in particular phases of movements is never enough because it excludes something or someone from benefiting from it thus it contributes to the reproduction of hierarchies, and hence it is the basis for the need for new phases of perturbation (struggle) and the basis upon which capital will develop new forms. The strategic horizon therefore is not to avoid making deals but to problematize how to make a given deal as inclusive as possible of the issues and subjects that have previously been excluded by it.⁷

However, this advancement of commons implies a collision sooner or later with the other social systems governing them, the challenge to existing local rules, of capitalist ways to measure and give value to social action, its value practices, and other networked structures, especially if their development—as the analysis of enclosures and of abstract labor demonstrates in the case of capital—*depends* on seizing the human and natural resources mobilized by these alternatives. And it is also clear that the force that alternative systems can sustain in this collision course with other social systems (their system’s *resilience*) is proportional to the degree of the multiple social powers they are able to mobilize. By a social system’s resilience I mean the ability of a social system to retain function and a sufficient degree of prosperity, reproducibility, and social cohesion in the face of the perturbation caused by the shocks and crises of capital’s

systems. Since capital and commons are to a large extent structurally coupled social systems, these shocks and crises (e.g., the loss of income due to unemployment and economic crisis or state victimization criminalizing particular struggles) have put to the test commons' resilience, forcing commons to adapt and evolve. The path of this adaptation, however, is open, and it can lead to a greater domestication of the commons within capital's loops (an example is the patriarchal nuclear family in the post–World War II period) or, on the contrary, the development of autonomy and resilience of the commons in spite of capital's circuits (examples include the experience of occupied social centers or the universe of grassroots voluntary associations socializing different aspects of reproduction).

My approach here seems at odds with classic Marxism. In that narrative, a class, the proletariat, is the social force that brings capitalism to its knees, that abolishes this system and replaces it with a new one. Social force and social systems are somehow two distinct entities; the former is instrumental in abolishing one social system and establishing a different one. My underpinning hypothesis instead is that a social force emerges, expands, and creates *effective* transformative powers only vis-à-vis other social forces as a social systems' manifestation of its own powers, and this is so only to the extent that it is necessary for its preservation and reproduction (and the preservation and physical/cultural/emotional reproduction of the people constituting it). To problematize social change, therefore, we need to problematize social forces, and to do so implies that we understand social systems, in particular commons.

The transformative journey that commons need to make before they become a social force shares some features with the journey that capital undertook in the last few centuries of its expansion. The development of capital has occurred through this twofold terrain: that of the positing of new methods to organize social cooperation under its own value practices, as a way

to provide answers to current social problems (often self-generated by capital itself), and the struggle against other modes of production and orienting senses, measures, and value practices. In the first case, for example, the imposition of a capitalist measure in factories (as local rules) offered a temporary “solution” to the masses of the poor and the dispossessed created by previous iterations of enclosures. It also developed on the terrain of struggles against alternative value practices, alternative ways to coordinate social reproduction. Whether these alternative ways were the methods of the old (feudal) ruling class, or whether they were the self-organized methods of the communities they enclosed and destroyed (whether in the home country or along the paths of empire with their stench of murder and genocide), or whether they were the emergent patterns of mutual aid and solidarity inside the factories and working-class communities fighting for shortening work time and increasing wages and labor rights, the key is that capital developed through struggle, accommodation, alliances, and strategic timing pursued by a variety of elements, movements, and organizations of the bourgeoisie.

The analysis on the continuous character of enclosures thus opens the door for its mirror image: the continuous character of the commons. Their construction depended in a variety of ways on different subjectivities and situated realities. Indeed, new forms of capital enclosures often correspond to capital’s attempt to close down previously achieved forms of commons (however inadequate, bureaucratic, and instrumental to capital accumulation they may have been regarded, like the “welfare state”).

<A>Divided Commons

The fallacy of the model thus leaves us with the problematic of the development of alternatives as latency, as a period between the presence of alternatives and their explosion as dominant

forms or modes of production. But this explosion of alternatives until the point of constituting a hegemonic social fabric of production is not possible if these latent alternatives do not *overcome* existing divisions within the social body, within the working class, corresponding to the middle-class hegemonic sense of what constitutes “betterment,” and therefore constituting “social order” along a wage hierarchy (De Angelis 2010b). Not only does capital create divisions of power, but the deals we cut with capital reproduce or reorganize divisions. A world in which these divisions are overcome is part of the puzzling equation that needs to be solved to address our “how do we change the world” question.

These divisions cannot be overcome through ideological appeal to unity—since often these divisions are based on material condition, and ideologies do not constitute ground for hegemonic unity. To the extent that the crisis intensifies and proletarianizes in conditions and prospects, it creates conditions for the flourishing of reproduction commons, domains of social action in which communities of all types, religious creeds, national or ethnic groupings, and political persuasions pool or seize resources together and develop ways to increasingly meet their needs while articulating and waiving their differences in common projects. In systems theory, diversity within systems is what allows their greater resilience and adaptability to new conditions. It goes without saying that this is not automatic, because the crisis also pushes for *divisions* along these traits. Avoiding divisions depends on organizational resources put on the ground. In many countries of the global North, this depends on the ability of radical and cosmopolitan commoners to mesh with the “mainstream” and sustain productive interactions that give rise to reproduction commons and advance value practices that push open the boundaries of commons.

To develop such an attitude for strategic problematization, however, requires that we

come to terms with the *fallacy of the subject*. This third fallacy is the idea that somehow the “working class” can be thought of a unified body vis-à-vis capital or, if divided, could be recomposed through some sort of ideological terrain or some other cultural or income homogeneity or representational affinity. Instead, I want to pose its existing division—both objectively and subjectively—as a founding condition of the real and problematize this division in terms of the radical transformation of the present. Elsewhere (De Angelis 2010b) I have problematized power hierarchies within the social body in terms of the “middle class,” which I define not as a homogeneous social group, with a given level of income, but as a *stratified field of subjectivity disciplined to a large degree by the norms of behavior of a modern society in which capital has a fundamental role in organizing social production through disciplinary markets, enclosures, governance, and its profit-seeking enterprises*. In other words, “middle-classness” is constituted through an idea of betterment and order achieved within the boundaries of the capitalist system.

I claim that from the point of view of radical transformation, one basic conundrum is that alternatives cannot be achieved either *with* or without the middle class. And it is for this reason that I proposed the thesis of the “explosion of the middle class” as a necessary element of this process of radical transformation. I understand this explosion as a sudden increase in the volume of social cooperation and the corresponding release of playful energies, in such a way as to create a sociocultural shock wave. This explosion corresponds to the emergence of commoning across systems boundaries and borders and through the wage hierarchy, a commoning through which borders and wage hierarchies are problematized and dissipated *as a result of social cooperation*. The problematic of organization is all inside the problematic of this explosion of commoning in ways that articulate three middle-class subversions existing in a latent state: the

subversion that goes on daily in terms of micropractices of refusal of alienation, the subversion of the middle-class condition--brought about by the system in terms of its own proletarianization and economic and environmental impossibility to universalise betterment qua the middle class, and the subversion of the middle-class community when engaged in communication *with* the *other* as the foreigner, the migrant, the marginal.

<A>Conclusion

Whether the avenue ahead is one of commons co-optation or emancipation is not a given. It will depend on political processes that have yet to be developed through social cooperation that is alternative to capital. The “cell” form of the social force responsible for establishing and reproducing life (or, alternatively, failing to sustain life, depending on the power relations), and *by this* abolishing capital, we call today “the commons.” By “cell form” I mean the general social form on which this movement *can be* generated and without which no weaving of cells into a new social fabric without oppression, exploitation, and injustice is possible. The commons is the cell form within which social cooperation for life reproduction generates *powers-to*⁸—the only basis by which people can multiply their powers to the nth degree through networked commons that overcome the boundaries of locality and challenge the *power over* the commons established by different forms by capital.

At least two things need to be considered in developing *powers-to* as an effective force. First, we should not romanticize commons. Actual commons can be distorted, oppressive, or emancipatory. When we enter the system-like loops of an established commons, we immediately notice what’s at odds with our best-held values, beliefs, and cultural mores. Too often, however, radicals decide to judge the commons on the basis of the values they express in relation to ours.

Some activists tend to build communities based on political affinity, others on the basis of religious faith.

In these *identity-based* commons, a clear boundary is established around the commons that prevents it from expanding *unless* the outside embraces the values and beliefs of the inside. “Conversion” here is the main mechanism of commons development, a mechanism that is, however, so inadequate from the perspective of the challenges of building an alternative to capital in the midst of an emergent crisis of social reproduction. I have run across radical social centers that refused to engage with the local community on the terrain of reproduction because the cultural marks of that community did not correspond with the principles of the activists. Instead of triggering a process in which these cultural marks could be engaged on the terrain of practice with the local community—for example, by promoting forms of communalization of reproduction such as child or elder care—clear identity boundaries were embedded in the social center’s commons, thus ensuring its insularity and vulnerability. Here identity politics is a barrier to the development of emancipatory social forms through commoning.

Second, capital can be confronted only to the extent that commons of social reproduction, and of everyday life reproduction in particular (Federici 2011), are developed as key sources of *powers-to*. The social reproduction commons are those commons developed out of the needs of its participants to reproduce some basic aspects of their own lives: health, food, water, education, housing, care, or energy. The development of these commons is strategically necessary, not only to contribute to reducing greenhouse gases through, for example, relocalizing food chains and advancing food sovereignty but also to bring within reach the problematic of social justice and autonomy, for example, with respect to care (Barbagallo and Federici 2012). Such commons can address people’s basic needs and empower communities to refuse the

demands of capital by offering access to alternative means of life independent of capital.

Notes

1. A movement has developed in Italy around the iconoclast comedy-rallies of the seasoned comedian Beppe Grillo, whose “V” symbol stands for neither *vendetta* nor *victory* but *vaffamculo*, that is, “fuck off” to the system and most politicians in Parliament. Here is a case in which the “no” is associated to the main philosophy of the movement, that there will be no real change unless “normal” people take things in their own hands. Is this an expression of the explosion of the middle class at the level of the political system? If so, as argued in this paper, it is inadequate, as it is not waved into everyday life of social revolution (De Angelis 2010b).
2. For a parallel analysis of the continuous character of primitive accumulation, see also Bonefeld 2001. Among the sources that inspired my approach was the identification of “new enclosures”—originally proposed by Midnight Notes (1990)—as central to the neoliberal strategy that emerged following the crisis of Keynesianism in the late 1970s.
3. See, e.g., the notion of system perturbation in Luhmann 2012.
4. For a detailed comparative discussion of the two, see, e.g., Chattopadhyay 2012.
5. David Graeber (2011: 98) calls this “baseline communism,” that is, “the understanding that, unless people consider themselves enemies, if the need is considered great enough, or the cost considered reasonable enough, the principle of ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’ will be assumed to apply.” Alan Page Fiske and Nick Haslam (2005: 270) refer to this as “communal sharing,” one among four basic ways that communities and societies have to coordinate action. For a full discussion see Fiske and Haslam 2005: 267–98.

6. See, e.g., the impressive case of Salinas, a small town in Ecuador in which most of the population belongs to some sort of cooperative (De Angelis 2010a).

7. Precisely for this reason, the development of commons of social reproduction (with their local rules and their networked structures) does not necessarily involve only the creation of new institutions (with a lower degree of structural coupling with capital); it also involves the advancement of commons within existing institutions. Indeed, even the setting up of new commons-based institutions and associations depends on some structural coupling with capital, be it the conformity of a building with “health and safety” regulations, the need to issue invoices of some sort in some activities of fund-raising, or the signing of a work contract.

8. For a discussion of *power-to* as contrasted to *power-over*, see Holloway 2002. For a critical engagement in light of the problematic of the organization of alternatives to capital, see De Angelis 2005.

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Massimo De Angelis is a professor of political economy at the University of East London. He is the author of *The Beginning of History* (2007) and editor of the *Commoner*, a web journal he founded in 2001.