

INTERPRETIVE POLICY ANALYSIS CONFERENCE 2021

Panel Title:

Commons in the Real World: Can They Be a Democratic and Sustainable Alternative to Market Capitalism?

Panel Convenors:

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The Commons have become an ‘idea in good currency’. Books, articles (Standing 2019; Bollier 2014; Bollier and Helfrich 2019), platforms, and websites (<http://demeent.eu>; <http://commonsstrategies.org/who-we-are>, www.onthecommons.org; <https://commons.blog>) promote the idea of the commons as a feasible organizational alternative to current institutional arrangements. Perhaps most tellingly, urban consultants embrace the idea of the Commons and organize conferences and workshops to promote them as a cure for many of society’s ills. What is the promise of the Commons that they have developed from a relatively specialized form of human collaboration in the work of Elinor Ostrom (1990) into their current popularity?

One way to define the commons is as a “social system for the long-term stewardship of resources that preserves shared values and community identity” (Bollier 2014, 175). In the skeptical but constructive spirit of the title of this panel, we will discuss the Commons from several angles:

- What are the commons? The literature offers many examples of successful local Commons. Are the Commons distinct from other bottom-up forms of economic organization, such as cooperatives, associations, community wealth building, or civic enterprises, or is there more continuity than meets the eye?
- What does it take to create a Commons? Despite the current popularity of the Commons, we know relatively little about the inner dynamics of “commoning.” Ostrom proposed eight design criteria (Ostrom 1990, 96), but important as they are, they have little to say about the relational processes of developing and maintaining a Commons in the face of an indifferent or hostile political, administrative and corporate environment. The Participants of the First German Summer School on Commons formulated eight ‘orientation points’ for commoning. What are the challenges citizens and others face in organizing themselves to create a Commons?
- How do the Commons relate to the larger social context? Are the Commons premised upon autonomous, local, citizen initiatives, free spaces to which the state has little or no access, or do they work in potential cooperation with state agencies and businesses? How can the Commons function without being subjected to debt-fueled finance capitalism? Can laws facilitate the Commons, and if so, how? A different way of formulating these questions is if the Commons can be scaled up. A frequently lauded example of the modern Commons is the Internet, but what makes such an interconnected system of communication and content-dissemination a Commons? Are there city-wide, national or even transnational Commons? What are the obstacles to cooperation or the scaling up of commons?
- How do Commons systems operate in the adverse political economy of neoliberal capitalism, a politico-economic arrangement in which giant corporations, an opaque global

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financial system, national governments, and transnational organizations loosely cooperate in manufacturing, commercial and service provision, international trade, and financial speculation. One of the key elements of this complex has been, and still is, the enclosure of commons and the subsequent exploitation of public wealth (Bollier 2002). In fact, the enclosure of a Commons is the favored business model of market capitalism. The attraction of the Commons is that they embody the ideal of an alternative model of political economic organization. Can they really be a viable alternative to the hegemonic corporatist-administrative complex? Can the Commons carry the functions of the capitalist order and improve outcomes to be more ecologically and equitably sensitive?

- Commons are not just an alternative economy. They also embody the ideal of more inclusive, authentic and participatory form of democracy. What is the democratic potential of the Commons? Do we need the Commons for democratic renewal?

Participants

Moderator: Hendrik Wagenaar

Participants:

- Silke Helfrich and David Bollier (Introduction: the Commons Strategy Group)
- Sandro Busso (The Commons and the Foundational Economy)
- Koen Bartels (“The Commons, Action Research and Social Transformation”)
- Liz Richardson and/or Catherine Durose (tba)
- Paul Chatterton (Tba)
- Roy Heidelberg (tba)
- Hendrik Wagenaar (“The Slotervaart Commons Lab”)

We welcome other papers/presentations on the themes of this panel. We are designing an interactive format for this panel. Be prepared that your ‘presentation’ does not exceed 10 minutes. In addition, as presenter you will also lead small group discussions.