



# Introduction: Advancing the Commonsverse: The Political Economy of The Commons

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

This introductory article sets out the twin goals of this special issue: “Advancing the Commonsverse: The Political Economy of the Commons”. The first is to introduce the innovative work of David Bollier and Silke Helfrich in theorizing and researching the commons. The second is to explore the possibilities and constraints of the commons and the process of commoning as they unfold in real-world political-economic settings. Bollier and Helfrich have formulated a remarkable, ‘in-the-round’, moral-empirical theory of the commons. In their social ontology, peer governance and moral economy commons form a subversive alternative to the capitalist order. Bollier and Helfrich’s theory restores an older tradition of a moral critique of capitalism in the tradition of “moral economists” such as Karl Polanyi and H.P. Tawney. It raises important questions about the socio-ethical foundations of our society and economy, the relationship between civil associations and the state, and the nature of the state. In the final part of this introduction, we discuss the complex relationship between the commons and the state. We frame this relationship as one of mutual dependency and argue for the careful redesign of our institutions of public administration and democratic governance to make them more receptive and accessible to the creative powers of the commons. Finally, we introduce the contributions to this special issue, including a reflective concluding essay by David Bollier.

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This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Silke Helfrich (1967–2021). The worldwide community of commons activists and scholars misses her passion, creativity, and unwavering, generous commitment to the advancement and understanding of the commons.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this special issue is to provide a theoretical, methodological, and practical elaboration of the possibilities and constraints of the commons and the process of commoning as they unfold in real-world political-economic settings.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the contributions is on the under-explored intricate relationship between commons, the state, and the political economy. Commons are an alternative form of social organization based on two related moral claims. The first is about commons as a form of social-economic provisioning that is functionally, democratically, and morally superior to that provided by market capitalism. The second is that commons are a viable and robust alternative to the current neoliberal political economy. The first claim is the less ambitious of the two. While often developed in the form of a critique of the neoliberal economy or economic governance (Hirst, 1994; Exner, 2021), and of a state that aids and abets neoliberal institutions (Wagenaar and Prainsack, 2021), the commons literature offers enough convincing empirical examples of local commons that provide social goods and services in an effective and democratic way (see also Bollier & Helfrich (2015) as an example of how extensive the literature is on this point).

The second claim is much more ambitious. It states that commons, or a system of commons, can be sufficiently

stable and enduring to provide essential services and goods at scale, and do this in a way that is more effective, more democratic and more ethical than the institutions of our current neoliberal political economy. The problem here is that there are few, if any, empirical examples of a national or international political economy that is organized around commons. Moreover, while states and businesses might tolerate, or welcome local commons, perhaps as a democratic supplement to their functioning, large scale commons would be in direct competition with either one of them. Just think of a commons, or a federation of commons, that succeeds in supplanting the current production of money by privately owned banks with a system of public money. The immediate dismissal by governments to even the suggestion of such an innovation speaks volumes.

It is not our ambition to supply a blueprint for a commons-based political economy in this special issue. Instead, we aim to explore situated practices of commoning and suggest arguments and ways of thinking that help to advance the theory of the commons. The unique contribution of this special issue is that all articles explore the tensions, dilemmas, and opportunities that arise at the interface of the commons, state, and political economy. We are guided in our analysis by the ideas of commons scholars and activists David Bollier and Silke Helfrich. It is not our intent to prematurely narrow down the rich variety of scholarship on the commons to one theory. However, as we will explain below, over the years, the work of Bollier and Helfrich has provided us with a comprehensive framework of ideas, concepts, observations, and suggestions for practice that help us to address some of the major challenges facing citizens, activists, and scholars involved with commoning in the real world.

Our starting point is a set of conceptual and methodological blind spots in Ostrom's legacy that have limited our conceptual understanding of how commons emerge and operate in the political-economic context of market capitalism and in relation to the state. To address these limitations, we highlight the significance of Bollier and Helfrich's (2019) book *Free, Fair and Alive* as offering a moral-empirical critique of the capitalist political-economy and envisioning a relational alternative: the Commonverse. Next, we outline what we believe to be the contours of a theory of the state needed to advance the commons as a democratic and sustainable alternative to market capitalism. Finally, we introduce the articles included in the special issue and reflect on their insights and contributions to articulate the direction of travel for future commons research and practice in relation to the state and political economy.

## COMMONS THEORY BEYOND OSTROM

The literature on the commons is strongly influenced by the legacy of Elinor Ostrom's (1990) seminal work. Following Hardin's (1968) pessimistic analysis of 'the tragedy of the commons' (but see Heidelberg's contribution to this special issue for a dissenting view), Ostrom famously demonstrated that cooperative behavior was possible outside the market and the state. Focusing on natural resource systems, she showed that communities were able to design and implement cooperative arrangements that were successful over long periods of time in managing scarce resources. She coined the term 'common pool resources' to indicate how such arrangements enable a transition from fragile and unstable open access resources to a viable, jointly managed resource system. One of Ostrom's lasting legacies is the set of eight design principles that constitute successful commons.

Despite her contribution to scholarship on the commons, in hindsight, Ostrom misunderstood some fundamental aspects of the nature of commons. The rational actor approach to collective decision making, with the methodological individualism and desire for nomothetic explanations that undergirded her work and that of the Bloomington school, carried forwards foundational assumptions from Hardin's (1968) work and introduced five blind spots in contemporary commons research.

First, despite her use of case studies, Ostrom's work displayed a relative lack of attention to the ethnographic and relational aspects of local collective action. Commons are rooted in, and cannot be seen apart from, the values, traditions, customs, and practices of the contexts in which they emerge. Second, and related to the preceding point, Ostrom showed a methodological and conceptual disregard for the hermeneutical aspects of the commons; that is, for the meaning that these social and political events have to citizens, officials, and professionals who are involved in these processes of self-governance. The effect of both these methodological blind spots amounts to more than some empirical gaps to fill with alternative methods. Whose knowledge, practices, and interests are included and made visible matters for democratic governance and the kind of changes and world we believe is possible (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003).

Third, Ostrom's hypothetical-nomothetic approach to the commons ignored the all-important historical dimension of the commons. It failed to see their crucial role in the development of pre-capitalist political-economic relations in Europe (De Moor, 2008), or their roots in Catholic social theory and early socialism (Exner 2021), and the continuities with contemporary commons. Ostrom's disregard for history goes deeper than merely overlooking

earlier historical examples of commons. It ignores the commons as a seminal spirit in human community. As the activist and ecologist Tim Hollo (2022) says:

we also see how ecological culture has always chafed at its enclosure, physically, institutionally, and culturally, and how anti-ecology creates new impetus and new ways for it to do so. As Donella Meadows reflected 'self-organization is such a basic property of living systems that even the most overbearing power structure can never fully kill it' (p. 62)

For the political-economy of the commons this is a crucial insight. We will return to it later in this introduction when we discuss the role of commons in transformational change. Commons are a form of social organization but also a deep-seated impetus to resist domination. They are a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1985).

Fourth, Ostrom's work ignores larger theoretical and moral questions about the relationship of commons to the state and the economy. This is important for an adequate understanding of the nature of commons and the needs and aspirations of commoners. Commons are not just another tool in the armory of politicians and administrators to add to the repertoire of governance tactics in advanced societies. They are both a critical commentary and subversive gesture to the capitalist economy. Finally, and related to the preceding point, the rational actor bias has precluded any interest in the prefigurative democratic dimension of the commons. Yet, engaging in local collective action is a key example of enacting associative democracy and transformative social relations in the face of dominating power (Silver, 2018; Zechner, 2021).

Since Ostrom's work, an abundant literature on the commons has emerged. Commons have been identified in many domains besides natural resources, such as cultural goods, knowledge, infrastructure, neighborhoods, planning, care, and health commons. (Hess, 2008; Feinberg et al., 2021). Many, though certainly not all, of these 'new' commons are, not surprisingly, situated in urban settings (van Laerhoven et al., 2020, p. 221; Feinberg et al., 2021). Yet, despite the abundance of literature about the commons, an extensive catalogue of their benefits to its members, and the large number of rich, evocative case studies, it is fair to ask to what extent our understanding of the commons is converging towards a systematic understanding of their major characteristics and challenges (Durose et al., 2021). Excellent overviews by Hess on the 'new commons' (2008) and Feinberg et al. (2021) on urban commons raise many important issues but little consensus. The result is that, all too often, commons continue to be discussed or

dismissed as standalone citizen initiatives in managing a local resource (see also [Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016, p. 14](#)).

Commons emerge and operate in resistance to enclosure and austerity spurred by an unsustainable political-economic system. The purpose of enclosure is to bring a shared resource under a capitalist market regime to secure profits for a few privileged or powerful actors. The privatization of public services and resources are examples of how enclosure is imposed on society by corporations, supported by governments, law, and finance ([Polanyi, 2001 \[1944\]](#)). Austerity, the cutting of the state's budget, debts, and deficits in the name of financial discipline, literally robs people of housing and scales down health, social and childcare, and other public infrastructure ([Blythe, 2015, p. 247](#)). Market apologists will argue that enclosure and austerity are necessary to restore competitiveness and placate global financial markets. However, that argument is increasingly undermined by the unsustainable social costs and rise in excess deaths, the destruction of our natural environment ([Raworth 2018](#)) and the social pathologies of the gap in income and wealth even in developed societies ([Pickett and Wilkinson 2010; Pickett 2014](#)).

The resulting situation is what we might call 'the real tragedy of the commons', their relegation to the margins of public, political and economic debate. Commons are a subversive assertion in the everyday environment of economic activity and government functioning. In their organization, governance, and output, they embody a democratic and sustainable alternative to the hegemonic political-economic order. In the words of the political philosopher James Tully, commons are a "practice of freedom", realizations of the always present possibility in the face of state power to "act otherwise" ([Tully, 2008, p. 23](#)).<sup>2</sup> That message is usually not lost on the corporate, financial, and governing elite. Commons usually operate in a hostile or at best indifferent ideological and institutional environment that generates numerous challenges to their functioning, durability, and institutional embedding.

Commons are not alone in this existential challenge. However, the literature fails to offer clear-cut demarcations from and synergies with other prefigurative initiatives, such as social movements ([Opp, 2009](#)), social entrepreneurship ([Nicholls, 2011](#)), cooperatives ([Sanchez Bajo & Roelants, 2013](#)), social innovation ([Moulaert et al., 2013](#)), civic enterprises ([Wagenaar and Healey, 2015; Wagenaar 2019](#)) and various forms of government-driven democratization ([Warren, 2014](#)) such as interactive governance ([Edelenbos & van Meerkkerk, 2016](#)) and co-production ([Agger et al., 2015](#)). This is not merely a sterile exercise in conceptual classification, but raises the key question of what is distinctive about commons. Which values, beliefs, aspirations and practices distinguish

commons from these prefigurative initiatives and which do they share? And are these values, beliefs, and practices sufficiently strong and compelling to cohere into a robust alternative to market capitalism, state government and the various attempts to give citizens an independent role in providing for flourishing societies? Or, as Hirst argues with regard to civil associations in general, are commons in the end merely a more efficient and effective way of organizing the market economy within the legal and political framework of liberal democracy ([Hirst, 1994, p. 68](#))? Answers to these questions will need to be developed by further exploring commons' internal governance, financing, outputs, and relationships with state power.

Commons aspire to an alternative form of governance. But how do you govern yourself when you cannot easily rely on institutionalized forms of management and governance? And how do you protect and develop innovative practices as initiatives grow and institutionalize over time? Instead of the hierarchical-bureaucratic government of state organizations, commons practice self-governance by peers, through a mixture of informal rules, social norms, and more formal procedures. Bollier and Helfrich argue for a dialectic between culture and structure, openness, and formal procedure, to attain an optimal balance between reliable and effective functioning and creativity and novelty ([2019, p. 121](#)). Fruitfully engaging in such a dialectic is an ongoing challenge that requires joint learning ([Powell, 2021](#)) and takes shape through a variety of pathways and dynamics ([Durose et al., 2021](#)).

Another crucial subset of governance challenges concerns the financing of commons. Commons need financing to achieve a minimum of structural independence. In a market-capitalist environment, the institutions, laws, customs, and tax arrangements that govern the financing of the economy are heavily skewed towards the advancement of business, banking, and capital. In addition, the values and practices that govern the financing of the service and production sector are geared towards profit maximization. It is a fact of life that governments facilitate the proper functioning of the corporate and finance sector through generous corporate welfare instruments ([Farnsworth, 2012](#)). Even money, the heart of capitalist activity, is privatized, its production indissolubly bound to debt creation, thereby favoring the owners of capital and impairing those who rely on work and loans as sources of income ([Pettifor, 2017; Wagenaar & Prainsack, 2021, ch. 8](#)). In such an environment, it is not only difficult to obtain independent, structural sources of income, but, equally important, to prevent the spirit of the commons from being compromised by the values of finance capitalism. Governments might be a halfway

solution as some commons rely on state subsidies for their survival. But, more often than not, the acceptance of subsidies implies that commons have to accept the agenda and practices of government.

While the literature is eloquent about different types of commons (Hess, 2008) and their benefits (Feinberg et al., 2021), it has less to say about their outputs. Historically, in premodern times, commons, in the form of guilds, were a form of ‘corporate collective action’ that provided protection against shared risks to groups of professional producers. These were risks of supply, financing, war, and natural calamities that endangered the livelihood of communities. Their rationale was risk pooling, income security and welfare enhancement in a world of scarce resources, weak states, and a growing population (De Moor, 2008). So, historically, one of the central features of commons was the combination of manufacture and production with protection of the community. This raises a number of important questions about contemporary commons, such as: What are commons for? In what ways are commons, in what they produce and the organization of their production, a genuine alternative to market capitalism? How do commons today combine production and protection?

Finally, the relationship between commons and state power shapes their organization and functioning. Guilds operated in a feudal environment that was characterized by the virtual absence of state protection, fragile financing and supply chains, an almost complete lack of information about the world beyond the immediate environment, and the constant threat of religious and civil strife. This necessitated an exclusionary kind of commons, organized around professional groups, that regulated access and production by formal procedure and in exchange provided financial and other forms of protection to group members. Contemporary commons operate in a complex and densely interconnected political-economic environment. In the developed world, that environment is characterized by the presence of the state as one actor amidst powerful corporations, transnational entities and a plethora of market and trade arrangements. To short-circuit a long and complex discussion: commons and state power are interconnected in three ways.

First, the state is the guardian of the rule of law. Rules that stipulate the legality of law and administrative procedure protect against infringements of health, freedom, privacy and integrity by powerful corporate actors, and guard against arbitrary behavior by the state itself. In other words, state power provides the “thin procedural morality” that allows a pluriform landscape of commons (and other associations) to emerge and properly function (Hirst, 1994, 58).

Second, the state is the platform and guarantor of democratic procedures. In liberal democracies, these consist of periodic elections, but equally important, of a vibrant civil sphere (Alexander, 2006; Edwards, 2014). In authoritarian regimes, commons do emerge, but often in defiance of the regime and to produce and allot the necessities of life that a failed state does not care to provide. The challenge for commons in liberal democracies resides in the bias of states towards the corporate sector. To survive, states require the financial and ideational support of the financial and corporate sector (Streeck, 2017; Kuttner 2018).

There is a third, indirect relationship between commons and the state. Markets, despite their individualistic logic of competition, profit and utility maximization, are in fact dependent on the practices and morality of social communities. Informal and unremunerated child and health, care, trust, and reliability in living up to the terms of a contract, are examples of communal practices that are at the heart of capitalism’s so called reproduction function (Exner, 2021, p. 31). In developed economies it is the state that guarantees such informal practices, although privatization and austerity have endangered capitalism’s reproduction function.

In sum, commons theory continues to face several conceptual and methodological blind spots deriving from Ostrom’s legacy. These blind spots limit our ability to understand and advance the commons in relation to the political-economic order. The current strategy of developing and cataloguing isolated cases that challenge hegemony is ultimately a losing one. The existential challenges that commons face in terms of internal governance, financing, outputs, and relationships with state power beg for systematically comparing and integrating diverse practices of commoning based on an overarching framework that offers a convincing political-economic imaginary and language. We believe that Bollier and Helfrich offer exactly this.

## **FREE, FAIR AND ALIVE: THE COMMONS THEORY OF DAVID BOLLIER AND SILKE HELFRICH**

One of the most developed articulations of a systematic theory of the commons is the work of David Bollier and Silke Helfrich. For more than a decade they jointly published several books on the commons and have been at the heart of the rapid expansion of a global network of commons practitioners and scholars. Their last book *Free, Fair and Alive. The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (2019) aspires to two things. First, to formulate a comprehensive theory



of the commons that addresses most of the challenges formulated above. And second, and more ambitiously, to usher in a sea change, an Ontoshift as they call it, in our understanding of the commons in the context of the contemporary political-economy that ‘we regard as realistic and desirable’ (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, 35).

In many ways, and in contrast to much writing about the commons, FFA is a major work of social and moral theory. The book raises important questions about the socio-ethical foundations of society and the economy, the relationship between civil associations and the state, and the nature of the state. It restores an older tradition of a moral-anthropological critique of capitalism in the tradition of “moral economists” such as R.H. Tawney, E.P Thompson and Karl Polanyi in particular (Rogan, 2017).<sup>3</sup> Contemporary analysts have clearly not ceased to find moral fault with the capitalist order,<sup>4</sup> but the majority is either conceptual (Mirowski, 2014; Brown, 2017; Fraser 2023) or output-oriented in that it focuses mostly on inequality of wealth and income (Pickett and Wilkinson 2010; Piketty 2014; see also Rogan, 2017, pp. 1–3).

FFA also exemplifies another powerful tradition of ethical critique of the capitalist order: the radical pedagogy articulated in the works of Paolo Freire (1970) and Ivan Illich (2001). Both Freire and Illich did not so much criticize the capitalist order but resist its structural domination by developing an experience-based, practice-oriented pedagogy for workers and farmers (Freire), and by questioning the labor exploitation and energy intensiveness that underlies the capitalist order (Illich). FFA’s relevance for 21<sup>st</sup> century developed societies is the focus on collective learning that occurs in relationships between peers that is characterized by equality and mutual respect. An example can be found in the development model of the successful campesino a campesino movement in Latin America (Holt-Gimenez, 2006). The goals of the shared learning process are practical problem-solving, awareness of the many forms of structural domination that the system imposes on the community, and the attainment of communal pride and identity. Although FFA does not mention Freire, it explicitly refers to Illich’s tools for conviviality as “tools that strengthen creativity and self-determination” (2019, 77; 190). As Bartels highlights in his contribution, exploring the synergies between the commons and action research forms an important strategy for advancing the transformation towards a new political-economic order.

Yet, FFA is also, perhaps above all, practical. The book is based on the close-up observation of, and direct experience with, hundreds of local commons in dozens of countries. Through a process of systematic abduction (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014; which Bollier & Helfrich call “pattern mining” (2019, p. 99)), they derived more general principles

of organization and governance from their experiences with, and observations of, commons. In the spirit of Tully’s practices of freedom, Bollier & Helfrich’s emergent theory of the commons and commoning tries to do justice to the inherently subversive nature of commoning in a market-capitalist society. It is important to notice that Bollier & Helfrich don’t use the word theory but instead “pattern” to emphasize the open, practical nature of their conceptualizations that is “adaptable by design” through people’s situated knowledge and experience (Bollier & Helfrich 2019, 99). In addition, they formulated a language that avoids the assumptional baggage of the prevailing political-economic order. With this book, Bollier & Helfrich have written a highly developed, action-oriented, political theory of the commons that includes both functional patterns of organization and functioning as well as an ethics of commons and commoning. In the remainder of this Introduction, we present an outline of this theory, and indicate how it has informed the contributions to this special issue.

Definitions of the commons are notoriously insipid. That is, they list the elements of the commons and sometimes their functioning, but tell you little about their *raison d’être*, their meaning and their justification for existing in the world as we know it. Many definitions have a functionalist slant and follow Ostrom’s work in conceiving of commons as a participatory vehicle for managing some valued resource. Bollier & Helfrich also acknowledge Ostrom’s design principles, but they point out that these restrict themselves mostly to issues of commons governance and “do not say much about the inner life of commons or the complexities of what it means ‘to common’” (p. 97). Bollier & Helfrich stake out their ambitions by presenting a ‘framework’ to convey that “commoners are engaged in “world-making in a pluriverse” (ibid.). That phrase, an example of their transformation of the language of commoning, is meant to capture “the core purpose of commoning: the creation of peer-governed, context-specific systems for free, fair and sustainable lives.” (Ibid.) Commons thus go beyond resource management in that they are an organized communal activity for attaining a just and sustainable form of life within the prevailing political economic order.

## BOLLIER AND HELFRICH: SOCIAL THEORISTS OF THE COMMONSVERSE

How do commons achieve their moral and practical purpose? The core of Bollier & Helfrich’s framework is what they call a “Triad of Commoning”. The triad consists of three “deeply interconnected” spheres or domains of collective action that need to be attended to in order to

call something a commons (2019, p. 98). These domains are “social life, peer governance and provisioning” (ibidem). Each of these domains is broken down into a number of separate tasks that need to be accomplished to successfully address the challenges of self-organizing a just and sustainable communal existence. For example, social life requires among others that participants “practice gentle reciprocity” and “preserve relationships in addressing conflicts”, while peer governance requires among others to “share knowledge generously” and “peer monitor and apply graduated sanctions” (2019, pp. 103, 120).

A fundamental aspect of Bollier & Helfrich’s framework is their insistence that we need to radically rethink the commons ontologically (relating to the nature of reality), an ambition they call the *Ontoshift*. The challenge they confront, early in the book, is the almost complete hegemony of the neoliberal worldview over our collective and individual imagery. Or, conversely, the disappearance from our collective consciousness of principles of living and working together, mutual care, and sustainability as viable ways of organizing human society, including economic activity. Their explanation is that the language of commoning has been superseded by a powerful market vocabulary. That is, in the Western world, roughly until the first industrial revolution, society was understood through a relational language that was organized around cooperation, mutual relations, the individual as sustained by the community, the integrity of the community, awareness of generational connections, a duty of reciprocal care, and respect for the natural environment. This linguistic universe constituted the taken-for-granted reality in which people thought and acted and that formed the frame of reference by which they understood their lives and the social, political, and cosmological order that they inhabited.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, a new order has been imposed (we are using Karl Polanyi’s language here) by emerging industrialists, supported by property owners and the new discipline of economics, that formed a radical break with the older one. Again, compressing a vast literature of the transformation of European mercantilist societies into a market capitalist political-economy, we need to think of this shift as a combination of changing practices and imagery of self and society, as well as a new new language to support those new practices and imagery. Most historians agree that this shift has set in around 1500, expanded slowly geographically and across production sectors for about three centuries, and accelerated in the second half of the eighteenth century in the United Kingdom, in its wake transforming the social order (Kocka, 2016). In the first half of the nineteenth century, the practical and intellectual transition from a rural/small town medieval life in which economic transactions were governed by solidaristic social

norms and customs to a market economy in which the economy was a separate domain ruled by its own laws that took precedence over the values and needs of social life was well underway. The factory system, and the mass migration to cities that it triggered, destroyed the fabric of the small-town and rural community, and introduced a whole new language to make sense of and legitimize the new practices. This was to become the language of market capitalism that is so familiar to us that it constitutes a self-evident moral reality. Freedom, efficiency, rationality, division of labor, competition, individual industry and achievement, property, ownership, contracts, the primacy of money, the environment and ‘human capital’ as resources to be used, developed, and put to use, and countless other terms and phrases are the familiar elements of this language *cum suis* life form.

Historians such as E.P. Thompson found that solidaristic life forms had never been completely eradicated. In small towns in Yorkshire, for example, they continued to exist against the onslaught of worker exploitation in the factory system. These communities inspired thinkers like R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, and Thompson himself to raise larger questions of the possibility of liberty, solidarity, and human flourishing, as well as a democratic agency within the institutional and linguistic confines of market capitalism (Rogan, 2017). FFA continues this tradition of moral-empirical critique of the capitalist political-economy. In their delineation of the first leg of the coming triad, ‘the social life of commoning’, Bollier & Helfrich in effect outline the composition of a solidaristic community. In their abductive strategy of inquiry, they engage in what they call “archeological excavation” of commons around the world, to “bring the little discussed realities of commoning to the bright light of day” (2019, p. 102).

Bollier & Helfrich propose a new language that restores the essential relationality and community of human existence. While Tawney and Thompson found inspiration in working class communities in Northern England, Bollier & Helfrich find inspiration in non-Western cultures. They cite the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern who says that in such cultures “persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them” (Strathern, 1988, quoted in Bollier & Helfrich 2019, p. 42). ‘Site’ is a well-chosen phrase for describing personhood, as our relationality does not extend just to other persons but also to the natural world and to past and future generations. This worldview is beautifully expressed by the Nishnaabeg activist and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in a paper tellingly titled “Land as Pedagogy”. (2014) In it, she shows how the Nishnaabeg people learn through interacting with the land and the forest, by carefully observing the behavior of animals, trees, and

plants, and sharing these experiences with the community, that includes the spirits of animals, sites, and forebears. Intelligence and agency are fundamentally distributed in the Nishnaabeg world.

The contrast of this language with that of market capitalism will hopefully not have escaped the reader.<sup>6</sup> We have lost the physical and moral experience of commons and commoning, and as a result the language with which to express this experience has been driven from our world, our educational system, our systems of administration, science, and production. With the loss of language, it has become difficult to even imagine the possibilities of a world of commons. We might understand the words on a cognitive level, but fail to grasp their experiential and affective meaning.

It is hard to overstate the significance of Bollier & Helfrich's work here. This is one of the moments in which the significance of *Free Fair and Alive* far exceeds that of a treatise of the commons and commoning and becomes an important work of contemporary social theory. The moral critique of capitalism always suffered from two problems. It was often accused of being nostalgic for an earlier rural and small-town form of life that is largely irrelevant to contemporary industrial society (Rogan, 2017). And it always struggled with the foundation of its moral and spiritual critique of capitalism. Normative moral critique must point towards an ideal situation. This ideal was sometimes found in religious belief, sometimes in the richness of associational life. In each case, however, these ideas were difficult to synthesize into a coherent conception of society and polity. Thinkers like Paul Hirst therefore reject any inborn tendency to associate, and instead settle for a minimalist ethic of the right to choose and exit associations according to individual need (Hirst 1994, 46). We do not claim that *Free Fair and Alive* has squared this circle. The moral basis of social life will probably always be a disputed issue.

What FFA does succeed in is, first, to integrate one of the great challenges of our times, the climate catastrophe, into their social theory, thereby making it particularly relevant to our current predicament. Second, its moral foundation is deeply relational, conceiving of people and their place in the world as densely interconnected. Our health, personality, skills, and achievements are strongly dependent upon others and upon the living world at scales that range from the microscopic (our microbiome) to the macroscopic (climate patterns), often to the point that it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between ourselves and the world around us. Third, Bollier & Helfrich succeed in broadening the moral basis of their social theory by drawing in non-Western understanding and categories. If these developments will result in a coherent conception

of society and the polity remains to be seen, but at least they carry the promise of injecting new energy into a long-standing debate.

One way that Bollier & Helfrich (2019) do this is by trying to restore and recreate a language that does allow us to connect with our relational ontology. They include two glossaries that respectively present the hegemonic language of market capitalism (citizen, incentives, leadership) (pp. 61–68), and one of “commons-friendly terms” (p. 73). It would go too far to walk through the whole list (pp. 73–90). By way of example, we mention ‘provisioning’. Provisioning means “meeting people’s needs through a COMMONS ...” (p. 87; capitals in original). It replaces ‘production’, which is inextricably associated with the neglect of the nonmarket spheres of family, community, and care, and a focus on market prices, efficiency, the externalization of costs, and so on. “A basic goal of provisioning is to reintegrate economic behaviors with the rest of one’s life, including social well-being, ecological relationships, and ethical concerns” (p. 87). Practically speaking, provisioning restores the continuity between the social and economic needs of people. In contemporary economics, the strict separation of production and consumption is a dogma. The term provisioning expresses that ‘consuming and ‘producing’ can be reintegrated in a way which would reintroduce ‘care’ into the way individuals and communities provide for their needs (p. 165).

Before her tragic death in 2021, Silke Helfrich was developing the essential interconnectedness of people, communities, and the natural environment through the metaphor of the mycelium. What did she mean by this? A mycelium is the vegetative part of a fungus and consists of a body of thread-like hyphae – long, branching filamentous structures. A mycelium forms when these fungal threads fuse together. Thus, each mycelium itself already constitutes a web; as such, it can connect with webs from other contexts growing into Common Mycelial Networks. The mycelium forms large webs under the forest floor that connects tree and plant roots and exchanges nutrients and information. They play a vital role in supply of water and nutrients to plants and trees and protect against some plant pathogens (Sheldrake, 2020). Forests consist of and are supported by a Mycelium Wide Web (MWW). Without these MWWs, life would literally be unthinkable.

We believe that the MWW is an appropriate metaphor for the commons. While in the popular and academic imagination institutions, laws, corporations, and the stratagems of politicians catch our imagination, just like trees and plants catch our eye in the forest, this political-economic ecosystem is made possible by a MWW of the informal, relational activities of citizen activities and



initiatives. Differently put, just as the majestic structure of a forest is supported by, and could not exist without, the subterranean Mycelium Wide Web, so the imposing structure of our political economy is supported by, and could not exist without, a worldwide web of commons and commoning, which itself is rooted in the “patterns of social life” (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019, p. 102) that permeate and sustain communities (Fraser 2023). These social life forms include shared purposes and values, a common sense of fairness and solidarity, voluntary contributions and informal care, situated knowing, and conflict resolution (op. cit. 103; Tronto 2015; Lynch 2022). Unnoticed by the official view, these patterns of social life lay the cooperative groundwork that makes our institutions work, gives meaning and direction to our collective endeavors, provides the values for a humane and flourishing society, and accomplishes the many forms of invisible labor that make the functioning of bureaucracies and businesses possible. In the spirit of the ‘moral economists’, Helfrich gives new content to the ethical foundation of the commons, arguing that the very possibility of our political economy rests on the presence of a thriving universe of commons, a *Commonverse*.

## COMMONS AND THE STATE

The subtitle of *Free, Fair and Alive* refers to the subversive power of the commons. Bollier & Helfrich have few illusions about the willingness of the state to embrace, or even understand, commons.

[W]e need to be utterly realistic about the nature of state power and its alliance with capital and markets. At best, those in power and making decisions in modern state institutions are highly ambivalent about upholding the inalienability of shared wealth. They typically want to boost investment and market activity at every opportunity (2019, p. 283).

The state is structurally biased against commons in a political economy dominated by giant global corporations (Crouch, 2011) and an opaque self-referential financial system whose major function is to engage in profitable financial speculation (Kay 2015; Brown 2017; Wagenaar & Prainsack, 2021), both of whom have effectively captured key political and administrative institutions. At best, states will pay lip service to commons, while blithely unaware of the countless legal, regulatory, and financial barriers towards commons that are built into governmental business (Wagenaar 2019). At worst, governments and state agencies will aggressively oppose and obstruct commoning initiatives if they perceive that these defy

their economic objectives. This leaves commoners facing a dilemma: “[S]tate power is too formidable and coercive to ignore, yet conventional attempts to reform it are likely to be unsatisfactory” (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019, p. 299).

What to do? For commons to succeed and form a viable alternative to a hegemonic system of global financial capitalism, we see three areas of urgent attention and reform. First, we would like to reiterate that one of the most important functions of the state is to uphold the rule of law. That means that citizens are protected against arbitrary and unlawful actions of businesses and the state. (Weber, 1922). In the institutional environment of the contemporary state, the rule of law makes the creation and functioning of commons possible. Although commons position themselves as an alternative to institutionalized state functioning, commoners should be aware of the importance of constitutional protection that advanced states offer them and insist on its full application.

A more demanding condition, second, consists of the state facilitating people’s self-governance and -provisioning. This is less utopian than it may seem. States may possess special powers and position themselves in opposition to civil society, but in a fundamental way they are also part of civil society. As Bollier & Helfrich state: “[N]o state is conceivable without these social systems” (2019, p. 286). While in market capitalism the state chooses mostly to coordinate with business and finance, it also includes civil associations in its repertoire of governance strategies. However, Bollier & Helfrich argue for a more fundamental shift, in which the primary function of the state would be to participate in active social coordination with civil society to marshal the situated experience and knowledge of associational life for more effective and democratic forms of social and economic governance. In the *Commonverse*, the state “must find ways for state powers to provide time, space, assistance and legal authority and organizational systems for people to devise their own solutions to problems” (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, p. 291). It would co-produce and cultivate ecosystems of commoning (see Bartels, this issue).

This involves a lot more than setting up and financing a local participatory initiative (governance-driven democratization, Warren 2014), important as this is. Instead, this requires the careful redesign of institutions to make them more receptive and accessible to citizens’ needs and creative powers. Exner mentions the State Secretary for Solidaristic Economy (*Secretaria Nacional de Economia Solidária*) in Brazil as an example. This was a subagency of the Ministry of Labor that cooperated with unions, cooperatives, social movements, NGOs, universities, and church organizations (Exner, 2021, p. 340). Zechner (2021; this issue) describes a different configuration of

state institutions and solidarity society, in which citizen groups succeed in winning elections and their values and practices are adopted by the municipal administration (see also recent work on governance-driven democratisation in [Bua and Bussu, 2023](#)). Both examples show that whole political systems can operate according to the values and practices of commons.<sup>7</sup>

Redesigning state institutions around local ecosystems is important but not enough in contemporary society. Some challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and migration are too big for local initiatives, even federations of initiatives, to solve by themselves. It would be naïve to think that we can do without the state's ability to address border-crossing issues and offer big solutions, such as large-scale engineering (e.g., the construction of wind parks in the sea for the generation of renewable energy) or the forging of international collaborations (e.g., the EU's General Data Protection Regulation to constrain the power of the giant data corporations). One of the unique strengths of the state is the combination of authority, financial might, and the ability of its bureaucracies to plan and implement large-scale projects. However, more often than not, this results in actions that do not address people's needs and are only marginally related to democratic procedure. Thus, third, state agencies must find ways to work at scale while being driven by people's needs, knowledge, experience, and creative powers ([Ansell, 2011](#); [Bartels, 2018](#)).

Moving to a supportive and responsive state requires that common theorists develop a theory of the state. Currently, commons theory too often depicts the state as a monolithic adversary. The early twentieth century moral critics of capitalism were deeply engaged with the vexing question of the nature of the state. Rejecting metaphysical Hegelian and collectivist conceptions of the state, they sought to frame the state, in Tawney's words, as "the diffusion of morality and the qualities of sociability that the polity sustained". Differently put, the state consisted of the "moral relationships" between people (R.H. Tawney, in [Rogan, 2017, p. 37](#)). In the final analysis, these efforts, while full of great insights and stimulating ideas, did not result in a persuasive theory of the state and of the state's relation to civil society. The dilemma between the dispersed, associative, somewhat anarchic, but creative nature of the civic sphere and the kind of administrative institutionalization that is needed for concerted, sustained collective action was not resolved. This was not the end of theorizing about the nature of the state. Currently, pragmatist ideas about the state look promising ([Ansell, 2011](#); [Wagenaar and Wenninger, 2020](#)). But whatever direction a contemporary theory of the state takes, it needs to incorporate the essential relationality of the world, the

associational nature of society, a merging of practices of associations with bureaucratic procedure, and a richer form of democracy that combines accountability, legitimacy and practical problem-solving. It needs, in other words, to allow for the essential interplay of practices of governance and practices of freedom.

## OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES

In this final section we offer an overview of the articles included in this special issue. We discuss how they advance the Commonsverse, reflect on their contributions, and set out the direction of travel for future commons research and practice in relation to the state and political economy.

Marina Pera and Sonia Bussu take on the challenge of how we can transform the relational dynamics between commons and the state. Taking Bollier & Helfrich's notion of public-commons partnerships as a starting point, their aim is to demonstrate how such commons-friendly infrastructure can be co-produced. In a qualitative analysis of a public-commons partnership in Barcelona (Spain), they explore the relational practices through which commons and municipal actors managed to build mutual trust and overcome mutual resistance, skepticism, and conflict. Commons activists, public officials, and social researchers navigated long-drawn out and often tense negotiations around the creation of new administrative instruments to evaluate the community-based impacts of commons and 'social return on investment' of asset transfer processes. Pera & Bussu conclude that such relational practices are vital to changing administrative cultures and democratizing working practices towards new prefigurative political-economic systems.

Antonio Vesco and Sandro Busso also explore the interface of the commons and the state. Their focus is on the Italian cases of Bologna and Napoli, often considered frontrunners in the commons movement. However, they demonstrate that, even in a context that seems advanced in terms of legal recognition and local government support for the commons, there are structural tensions between collaboration and co-optation that need to be constantly tended to. As not interacting with the state is not an option, they carry forward Bollier & Helfrich's thrust to explore ways to transform state power towards support of the commons. Challenging the conventional charge launched against collaboration with the state, Vesco & Busso argue that commoners are all but naïve; they are intimately aware of the risks of 'red-washing' radical change. Vesco & Busso conclude that commoners can preserve the commons and co-produce mutually beneficial arrangements by politicizing relationships with the state.

Roy Heidelberg offers a philosophical perspective on why we face structural tensions between commons and the state. Through a reading of the somewhat obscure yet relevant 16<sup>th</sup> century treatise *Book of the Governor* by Thomas Elyot, he considers the fundamental political difference between ‘the common’ and ‘the public’. The tension between these terms is often overlooked but critical to articulating an alternative conception of the commons in relation to the state. Heidelberg argues that the state was not only developed in conjunction with the notion of the public rather than the common, it has come to embody a logic in which the latter is subsumed to the former. Public refers to the more general population and good, while commons are more particular and peculiar that needs to be governed to establish order. The creation of the modern state thus means that the legitimacy and viability of the commons will be inherently challenged as being ‘out of order’ and in need of the state as a solution. Advancing Bollier & Helfrich’s *Ontoshift* thus compels us to critically appraise how the language of the state and its underpinning assumptions continues to enclose prefigurative change.

Liz Richardson, Catherine Durose, Matt Ryan & Jess Steele ask what ways of knowing could advance the commoning movement as theory-building and practice. They address several of the methodological and conceptual blind spots of commons theory we identified at the start of this Introduction in order to advance a ‘knowledge mycelium’ for the Commonsverse. Reflecting on their own diverse experiences with the commons and akin participatory approaches, they argue that we need different way of knowing and learning to integrate the transformative ambitions of the commons with the messy practice of commoning. Based on practice theory, they propose to develop Bollier & Helfrich’s abductive approach to empirically-grounded theorization by combining systematic comparison across contexts with interpretive analysis of everyday situated practices. Importantly, this is not just a methodological or epistemological argument but a way to advance the commoning movement through more systematic learning from diverse practices, dynamics, and pathways embodying shared values. Richardson, Durose, Ryan & Steele conclude that we can advance the Commonsverse by embedding ongoing learning from diverse practices within and across contexts.

Manuela Zechner takes the argument for commoning as learning further by highlighting the need to recognize and address the ‘micropolitics’ at the heart of struggles to integrate the commons and the state. With this she means developing a sensibility to “ways of relating to *others* that overcome fear, stereotypes, classes and hierarchies” (p. 450). She develops a feminist and militant approach that offers ways for finding a balance between abilities to listen

and feel on the one hand and to criticize and challenge on the other. She demonstrates how the development of this approach has been at the heart of the growth of the commons movement in Spain and Barcelona’s new municipalism. Based on the case of a childcare commons she was involved in, Zechner derives care, community, and resurgence as foundational concepts and practices of the micropolitics of commons. She concludes that the Commonsverse as envisaged by Bollier & Helfrich can become “sustainable at a relational and collective level” (p. 457) when all those involved in emergent micropolitical struggles engage in action research processes of mutual learning and change.

Koen Bartels similarly places mutual learning and change at the heart of the Commonsverse. Taking the existential paradox we outlined in this Introduction as his starting point, he aims to create new synergies between commons and social innovation around the ‘ecosystems’ needed to sustain prefigurative change. Following Bollier & Helfrich’s *OntoShift*, he argues that it is critical to consider the political-ontological foundations of ecosystems, a currently popular notion in the social innovation literature. The worldview that underpins ecosystems shapes what ethos dominates, how responsibility is allocated or shared, and to what extent prefigurative change is supported on its own terms. Bartels develops the notion ‘relational ecosystems’ to develop empirical and conceptual understanding of how we could actually co-produce conditions for sustaining prefigurative change in the face of hegemonic systems. Based on a narrative analysis of Liverpool, a case with uncondusive neoliberal political-ontological foundations, he argues that relational ecosystems could sustain prefigurative initiatives by creating conditions for prefigurative and state actors to learn together how to co-produce new ways of mutual support and transformation.

In his final reflective essay, David Bollier emphasizes the elemental character of commons, reflecting a desire by people to provision their needs directly, as self-governing communities working outside of the usual circuits of capitalist markets and state power. Commons are not so much innovations in governance but rather emerge organically from a subjective, experiential level of everyday life. They are a ‘parallel polis’ offering a space in which ordinary people, beset by an oppressive political-economic order, can (re-)assert moral agency and truth. The commons, by this reckoning, becomes an inherently subversive discourse and social project because it reframes many basic premises of social, economic, and political life. Bollier argues for an *OntoShift*, a move away from a world defined by individualism, calculative rationality, and material self-interest in markets, to one that is richly relational in all directions. Bollier envisions five areas of innovation to expand the Commonsverse: Commons/public

partnerships, new infrastructures to make commoning easier, legal hacks to open up zones of communing, relationalized finance for commons-based initiative, and new institutional structures of care.

A common thread in the articles is that we need to revisit how we understand commons in relation to the political-economy. These contributions offer various ways to reconsider underpinning epistemological and ontological assumptions in how we study and advance the commons towards more just, democratic, and sustainable societies. Even in conditions seemingly conducive to commoning, dominant social interests and state powers continue to shape whose knowledge and values are 'seen' and deemed legitimate in the political-economic system. The articles offer several illuminating examples of how commons are or could be sustained in collaboration with the state, but also emphasize the hard work, critical research, and learning practices needed to make this happen. Commoning involves confronting deeply engrained assumptions about what the world is and ought to be, and the articles demonstrate and further develop the tremendous potential of Bollier & Helfrich's work for engaging in this struggle to advance the Commonsverse.

## NOTES

- 1 We want to acknowledge that Open Access funding for this article has been generously provided by the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), Vienna.
- 2 With this phrase Tully seeks to find a language to articulate the implications of people's manifold everyday civic activities; implications, that is, in terms of what they mean for the state of our democratic and political-economic order: "The practices of freedom and their institutions of negotiation and reform constitute the 'democratic' side of practices of governance; the extent to which those subject to forms of government can have an effective say and hand in how they are governed and institutionalize effective practices of freedom. ... When not only act on accord with the rules but also stand back and try to call a rule into question and negotiate its modifications, they problematize this mode of acting together and its constitutive forms of relational subjectivity. This is the context in which political philosophy as a critical activity begins, especially when these voices of democratic freedom are silenced, ignored, deemed unreasonable or marginalised." (Tully 2008, 24–25) This is particularly important because, as we will see later, one obstacle for the commons to escape their local confines is the hegemonic language of market capitalism that makes many aspects of commoning incomprehensible to those who exercise power. It is one of the strengths of the work of Bollier and Helfrich, that we introduce later in this Introduction, that they are sensitive to the language dimension of commoning and its role in the their marginalization. We develop this theme in part 4 of this essay.
- 3 We do not argue that Bollier & Helfrich specifically aimed to write a 21st century update on Polanyi's great study. He appears in the book only once to illustrate his principle of fictitious commodities as enabling capitalist production (2019, p. 227).
- 4 Contemporary examples of moral critique can be found in the feminist (Gibson-Graham 2006) and postcolonial literature (Robinson 2021). Exner is interesting in that he finds the sources for a critique of neoliberal capitalism and the alternative of a solidarity-based society in Catholic social theory (2021).

It falls outside the scope of this introductory essay to discuss this important literature in depth.

- 5 An illustration of the powerful hold that the language of market capitalism has over us, is that most of us will read these sentences, and understand them cognitively, but will have a hard time 'getting it'. The reason is that the language of capitalism is so hegemonic that it has crowded out the experiences that would allow us to grasp this vanished world. There is a dearth of experiential hooks to attach these sentences to.
- 6 For another excellent example, see Kimmerer (2013).
- 7 There are strong similarities here with blueprints of associative democracy. Hirst, for example, states: "These goals (full employment, distributional justice, democratic control, an economy based on people's needs) require both democratically-governed firms and methods of cooperation between firms, public bodies and organized interests at local, regional and national levels" (1994, p. 98). The difference with a theory of the commons is that associations include organized interests such as unions and employer organizations, and the purpose of involving associations in economic governance is to support the market economy.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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