

# **‘The Commons’, an alternative to Sustainability?**

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‘A resource arrangement that works in practice can work in theory’  
Ostrom’s Law

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6. Tragedy, plunder, or expropriation?
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**Can we go further?**

# **Critique of** **sustainability**

# The Sustainability Paradigm

We are currently in the midst of a crisis of rapid ecological and climatic breakdown

The analysis of, and response to, this crisis is almost wholly mediated (from a human perspective) by the concept of 'sustainability' – totemic association between ecological and social justice and sustainability

Hence the importance of understanding the implications of our reliance on this concept

But what does sustainability mean?

Sustainability – a product not a process, a state in which any system is able to persist across time, successfully reproduce itself indefinitely.

# Critique of sustainability

Any system in a state that allows it to reproduce itself indefinitely fits the bill of sustainability

Anything that *could* carry on forever, regardless of the way in which it operates internally, or in relation to ecology

What sustainability as an end product means is imprecise; multiple processes that work towards different visions of sustainability may conflict with each other

only partially addresses the core of the problem, whilst a key aspect of climate collapse is the broken relationship between humanity and ecology resulting in a potential crisis of reproduction

Sustainability addresses the crisis of reproduction of human society, but not the underlying broken relationship between humans and ecology

# Critique of sustainability continued

Further, the concept of sustainability does not address issues relating to justice, climate or social

All future models of sustainability are hypothetical, and many of them are in fact profoundly undesirable

Eco-fascist dystopia, radically reduced and impoverished human population, enormous biodiversity loss

If we organise our response to climate collapse as an attempt to reach a state of sustainability we leave ourselves open to all of these pitfalls: widespread social and environmental injustice; competing and counterproductive policies reaching towards different visions of sustainability;

Something clearly needs to be changed to fix our broken relationship with climate and ecology, but can we do better than sustainability ?

Going further...

# Thinking beyond sustainability

# Social Symbiotism

I propose an alternative concept through which our responses to climate and ecological breakdown may better be addressed – Social Symbiotism

A move towards ‘The Commons’ as the primary site of economic activity

Within The Commons the moral principle underlying economic activity is that of ‘mutual aid’ (Graeber 2014: 67), with economic activity organised under the assumption of “*a kind of permanent mutual debt.*” (Graeber 2014: 71)

This is a 3-way logic of care, users care for other users, users care for commonly held resources, just as the commons care for them

A radical expansion of the commons, and an expansion of who (and what) we consider stakeholders within these commons may be a productive avenue – reaching towards a goal of ‘social symbiotism’ – the organisation of society as inclusive of non-human actors, and privileging the moral principle of mutual aid as foundational to increased spheres of economic activity

Our relationships with the physical and ecological systems, as well as with other humans, should hinge, too, on moral logics of care and mutual aid

# Social Symbiotism, P2

This potential alternative to sustainability paradigm addresses the weaknesses of sustainability –

Whilst both sustainability and social symbiotism are aspirational states, in the case of social symbiotism each step towards this aspirational state is beneficial in-and-of-itself

At the basic level, any moves towards social symbiotism address the root cause of climate and ecological collapse (broken relationship between humanity, ecology, and physical environments) in a way that the sustainability paradigm does not

Crucially, social symbiotism addresses a significant issue with the dominance of the concept of sustainability – that a sustainable future does not necessarily mean a just, desirable, one.

# Social Symbiotism, p3

Exploring 'permanent mutual indebtedness' further –

Gaia hypothesis, complicated but has potential to contribute an aspirational model of human – non-human relationships

Movement in ecological science, biology, systems science toward a model of the world as comprised of numerous interlocking, interdependent systems

Emerging picture of all species as engaged, on a fundamental level, in symbiotic relationships. All species, individuals, etc. contribute to maintenance of biosphere, in turn rely on continued existence of biosphere systems as a whole for continued life – in a very real sense we exist in a state of permanent mutual indebtedness towards ecosystems, and other aspects of planetary systems

Place of humans in this holistic systematisation. Reconceptualising the place of humans in the world, also suggests ways forwards on matters of social justice within the same framework as deals with climate collapse

We rely on the maintenance of society as a whole, as we rely on the maintenance of the biosphere in its role preserving the very conditions necessary for life – our relationships

# The immanent commons

# immanent

in British English

(ˈɪmənənt)

adjective

1. existing, operating, or remaining within; inherent
2. of or relating to the pantheistic conception of God, as being present throughout the universe Compare transcendent (sense 3)

# The Immanent Commons

The concept of ‘social symbiotism’ relies on the expansion of the areas of economic activity that are regulated as ‘commons’, and with it the moral logic of mutual aid that underlies economic activity there

Part of the strength of this lies in the fact that arrangements of this sort *already* exist all around us today, both visible and invisible – saturating the world around us

There are economic arrangements all around us in society that operate as commons, under the moral logic of mutual aid.

This is where we get the ‘Immanent Commons’

# The reliance of capitalism on non-capitalist economic structures

Despite the dominance of a Capitalist mode of production across society, other kinds of economic structure are found everywhere – including in ‘The Commons’

Accumulation by dispossession, David Harvey shows us the way in which continued Capitalist expansion involves ongoing processes of enclosure and expropriation of common property (Harvey 2005)

Ethnographies of migration and kinship show us the way in which the reproduction of capitalism – especially of the labour force – relies wholly on the non-Capitalist economic systems found in Families and kinship networks – extraction of value (Coe 2011)

Anna Tsing’s concept of salvage accumulation, describes the way in which Capitalism relies further on vastly diverse, alternative, economic arrangements (Tsing 2015)

# The commons live on!

Examples of commons exist all around us in the world today – both as the natural resource CPR management systems most prevalent in the literature of the commons, and in more subtle, pervasive forms

Provide us with an immanent (real, extant, and pervasive) model for organising towards an alternative to sustainability

An already existing way of organising economic activity in relation to ecosystems, natural resources, inter-species relationship that has the potential to address the root cause of the crisis of ecological breakdown

# What are 'The Commons' ?

# Mode of ownership

One way of looking at the commons is as a kind of property relation, in which property is collectively owned in some sense

Collective ownership is complex, often takes the form of qualified rights-responsibilities complexes – in the UK sometimes codified as ‘usufruct’ – beyond the very paradigm of a private property regime?

In some discourse, framed as a ‘third way’ between private and state ownership,

But is this all that ‘the commons’ are?

# System for Resource management

Another critical aspect of what we call ‘the commons’ are the systems for *management* of these common pool resources

Some ‘Obvious’ commons, like The New Forest, Intertidal zones in the UK, are *owned* privately, but managed as if they were common pool resources

Elinor Ostrom ‘Governing the Commons’ – the seminal piece in this field.

Broader conceptions of what a ‘commons’ is may include economic structures – like the situationally dependant pooling of labour amongst a family group etc.

# Complexities...

Some commons are bounded, some are not; some commons are best understood as systems of ownership whilst some seem to emphasise management strategies;

What economic arrangements we can include in our analysis of 'the commons' is highly variable when we take limited definitions based on property regimes or systems for resource management

Is it possible to imagine, say, the domestic labour of a family an example of a commons / CPR?

# **The Moral Basis of Economic Relations**

# The moral basis of economic relations

Graeber - Economic relations all have a moral basis, the way people act in relation to people-via-things is organised according to underlying moral imperatives

Proposes that - “...*there are three main moral principles on which economic relations can be founded, all of which occur in any human society, and which I will call communism, hierarchy, and exchange.*” (Graeber 2011: 94) – these principles co-exist across society, often in tension with each other

Here we are most interested in ‘communism’ - that is, the moral logic underlying “*any human relationship that operates on the principles of ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.’*”, also envisioned by Graeber as a “*state of permanent, mutual, indebtedness.*” (Graeber 2011: 94)

Core claim = an enormous part of the economic behaviour that people actually engage in is organised according to this principle (eg, relationships with family and friends, members of various in groups), the extent and magnitude of the application of this principle varies between societies

moral principles of exchange are not always followed, they define what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ behaviour in economic situations. Also worth stressing the idea that these three ‘moral logics’ are arbitrary divisions, perhaps better understood as competing, interlocking poles

*“One shares certain things or makes them freely available within the group: help repairing one’s nets in an association of fishermen, stationary supplies in an office, certain sorts of information among commodity traders, and so forth. Some categories of people we can always call on in certain situations, such as harvesting, moving house, building or repairing seafaring vessels. Finally, there is an infinite variety of ‘commons’, the collective administration of shared resources (‘the commons’). The sociology of everyday communism is an enormous field, but our ideological blinkers have led us not to see it all.” (Graeber 2014: 70)*

# Moral basis of economic relations and the commons

The Commons are an economic ‘space’ within which the moral logic of mutual aid operates as a dominant principle underlying economic activity

Complex and contradictory: other moral logics also at play; again, moral principles underlying economic relations are not absolutes, instead frameworks in which behaviour is constructed

“Resources” themselves as stakeholders – to be treated, too, in accordance with the moral logic of communism

There exist, already, spaces in which the normative assumption of how relationships between people, and between people and things, *should* be organised is one following the logic of mutual aid – including in ‘The Commons’.

# Tragedy, plunder, or expropriation?

# Tragedy or plunder of the commons?

‘Tragedy of the commons’ – according to Ostrom, this idea comes from a 1968 article by Garrett Harding

This idea, or at least the broadly applied narrative it produces, suggests that commons are bound to ‘fail’ – collectively owned or managed resources will inevitably degrade as a result of catastrophic over-exploitation

This narrative is not borne out by historical and contemporary evidence. As Elinor Ostrom shows us, when common resources are managed effectively they are actually highly resilient

Guy Standing offers an alternative – ‘The Plunder of The Commons’. He argues that the primary mode in which commons ‘fail’ (fall out of collective ownership/management) is via enclosure – often violent, expropriation

# Academic Marxism and 'the commons'

If the 'tragedy of the commons' is not borne out by the evidence, why are there few (visible) commons remaining?

Marxists have dealt with the commons in a number of ways :

The birth of capitalism – Marx and Primitive accumulation – the idea that the enclosure of commonly held land 'kick-started' Capitalism – resulting in the creation of a private property regimes and 'free labour' force

David Harvey and Accumulation by dispossession– positions the ongoing expropriation of commonly held resources as a core aspect of capitalist accumulation – continued existence of 'the commons'

# Bringing together interpretations of 'The Commons'

Marxism, as an academic framework, works well in placing the commons in relation to broader economic frameworks (across time and space), but... fail to apply

Anthropology, via the work of Graeber, contributes an 'on the ground' perspective, revealing complex internal dynamics – with broader implications for our response to the climate crisis

The way in which this theory of the moral basis of economic relations, with the principle of 'mutual aid' (unusually) taking precedent within economic systems that fall under the logic of 'The Commons', brings us to an alternative to the paradigm of sustainability

# Conclusions + Reflections

# Conclusions

The concept of sustainability has weaknesses

My proposed alternative is that of ‘social symbiotism’

An expansion of the commons, and the moral logic operating within them

A reorientation of the relationship between economy and ecology – promoting ecological, economic, and political justice

The immanent commons – alternative economic arrangements exist all around us as templates

The commons have been dealt with in academia in a number of ways

The ‘tragedy of the commons’ may in fact be better understood as a systematic dismantling, plunder, expropriation

# Reflections:

Had this project been able to go further...

- I would have liked to have a deeper look into the history of the concept of sustainability, the theorising behind it, and the story behind how this term came to dominate discourse around the climate crisis
- Further, I feel it would have been valuable to have been able to seek out and interpret more ethnographies of 'the commons'. As it stands, this project is very theory-heavy

My experience

- This project was an experiment for me, I've never been involved in any sort of research before.
- As such, it was a real challenge, at times scary, sometimes leaving me with feelings of doubt. But in the end the process has been highly rewarding and I feel lucky to have had this chance to experiment intellectually beyond the scope of my studies