Commons that Care Feminist Interventions in the Construction of the Commons

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> Childcare is valuable, critical, beautiful labor. As a form of work, childcare has been feminized and devalued in our society.
> – Regeneracíon childcare collective

> As we did all this, we discovered an incredible secret: the walls that constrain our everyday lives are riven with fissures, tears and holes…We can peer through them and see realities that exist right now, inside this world and inside of ourselves – magical realities in which people fashion their world together, everyone feels respected and loved, and people are responsible to one another and to a collective vision. The more we practice our magic, the more we're able to notice these holes, tug at their edges, and begin stepping through them into what awaits us.[1]
> – Regeneracíon childcare collective

Feminist and anti-capitalist activists and scholars growingly call for alternative visions of society and new ways of living and relating. It is in this context that the commons have become one of the key terms in the struggle against neoliberal capitalism and for the creation of alternatives to state or market organized properties. These debates and struggles can only be successful if feminist perspectives and knowledge are taken into account. Etymologically the word commons shares a history with other terms such as communism, community, or communal.[2] The commons evokes the language and history of pre-capitalist societies and social formations because a new mode of production in the form of economies of sharing and/or gifts is struggled for. Here, it is inevitable to take postcolonial perspectives into account in order not to construct, romanticize, and appropriate a foreign Other. The debates around commons are (and good that they are!) very diverse, allowing for a lot of space and many voices in the project of rethinking what a radical politics nowadays can and should be. This diversity and complexity of debates is represented in this essay, which has to be seen as something, much like the debates themselves, that is in process.

Paradoxically, the widespread enclosures and attacks on commons revealed their existence and caused the struggles towards defending them. While being a subject of hope and a horizon for alternatives to capitalist societies proponed by the radical left, the language of commons is also increasingly used (if not appropriated) in the area of governmental policy-making and corporate management. The revalorization of commons in these fields is rooted in the insight that the collective management of natural resources can, under certain conditions, be less conflictive and more efficient than privatization.[3] The awarding of Elinor Ostrom, a political economist and leading voice in the field of governing the commons, with the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009 or British Prime Minister David Cameron's policies on the 'Big Society' are just two signs for the arrival of the a particular understanding of the commons in mainstream economics and political discussions. Ostrom provided an analysis and evaluation of how commons are governed that proved ideas of the 'tragedy of commons' wrong as these are based on the rational-acting homo economicus. In the big society paradigm welfare state expenditures are reduced by transferring the provision of means of social reproduction from the welfare state to communities, which in effect means an unwaged privatization of these activities.

Nevertheless, the commons, standing in the tradition of class struggles, show great potential to open up creative spaces of discussion that try to imagine a world in which the reproductive needs of humans and non-humans are organized differently, outside the rules of commodity formation. Commoning is a set of diverse practices already happening in the here and now, outside the market. The debates on commons are multiscalar, working on the material level of the social

relations of production as well as on the level of social imaginaries. Whether in the form of a food cooperative, a childcare collective, or an activist camp, commons let us experiment with more equitable forms of life and therefore grasp a different world that is not only in the distant future. A static idea of a revolution that would precede its initiation is thereby deconstructed.

There is no one model for another system that should replace the current one. Commons as a concept could be a space that globalizes into a political discourse of different local and self-reproducing initiatives outside the market or the state while acknowledging and allowing for difference. It is a concept that asks socio-ontological and political questions. Practices of commoning can create new ways of relating and bring to the fore new subjectivities. Here, I agree with many feminist scholars in the need to deconstruct its hegemonic (if not only possible) form: the autonomous, white, male rational (mind and body separated) subject, at whose very basis appropriative and dominating relations are inscribed. (Feminist) psychoanalytical perspectives on the topic of subject constitution have proved especially useful here. As the history of political struggles has shown, an appeal to unity can never overcome the divisions going through the social body, whether they are based on racism or sexism. This is not to say that commons can or should sublimate the important work of social movements and their demands towards the state.

Political economist and scientist Massimo de Angelis shows how the positive movement for commons and the negative movement of class (and social movements) are different, but entangled and dependent. For no one can protest on the street who has not had food, and chances for a self-sustainable community to survive rise if that community is embedded in a broader political discourse. However, we have to be careful to not stress the positivity and creativity of commons debates too much. Critique, negativity, and sorrow in the analysis of capitalism and other oppressive structures should still be the starting point of every discourse in political movements. Such a method allows us to avoid uncritically or over-enthusiastically affirming or reproducing (neo)liberal arguments and reduces the danger of appropriation by these majoritarian discourses. The question is: “How do we at the same time set a limit to capital while allowing the reproduction of alternative systems that disentangle us from it?”[4]

If the commons are a space to envision a non-capitalist horizon, discussion around the everyday reproduction of our lives is inevitable. So far, a lot of the debates around commons are focused on knowledge and information, i.e., the potential of the Internet or the commodification of intellectual property rights. Very importantly, activists and scholars Silvia Federici and Camille Barbagallo remind us that, ‘no struggle is sustainable that ignores the needs, experiences, and practices that reproducing ourselves entails.’[5] DeAngelis’ question is rephrased and maybe specified by Federici further: ‘How do we struggle over reproductive labour without destroying ourselves, and our communities?’[6] It makes a lot of sense here to go back to the long history of materialist feminist analysis and struggles around housework and other caring work, as well as feminist attempts to deconstruct the autonomous male idea of the subject and the binaries (culture/nature, body/mind, private/public) from which it stems.

I want to develop the notions of care work (reproductive work done to reproduce the capitalist labor force) and caregiving (alternative ways of caring and relating in our communities) as two sides of the coin of reproduction in order to unite two discourses in commons debates. On the one hand there are feminist calls for putting care work at the center of discussions on commons. These calls are partly grounded in the fact that women, because of their responsibility for reproductive work such as housework and childcare, were historically more dependent than men on access to communal resources. On the other hand, there are calls for the deconstruction of the autonomous subject in favor of new relational subjectivities based on the acknowledgment of difference. Teacher of law and activist Ugo Mattei states that, instead of asking whether we have commons, we should ask in how far we are commons.[7] And Federici claims: ‘No common is possible unless we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them. Indeed, if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject.’[8]

I do believe that a feminist engagement with both these discourses, for the production of new ways of relating and for the recognition of care work as work, can show that they are interdependent feminist concerns. Feminist Marxists stress the relational character of devalued reproductive activities. This devaluation is expressed for example in relatively lower wages in the care sector or the non-recognition of housework as work. Aiming to construct subjectivities that exist in relation instead of autonomy, other feminist theories (i.e., sexual difference approaches) reveal the maleness of the

autonomous subject and the destructive and appropriative nature of the relation of this subject to the other. Their common desire is to bring to the fore what is repressed and devalued in current societies: subjects are dependent on others. This essay should not be the space for a theoretical exploration like this. Rather, I will go on by summarizing some of the insights feminist Marxist analysis can give to the commons, their appropriation, and the struggles around care work.

Feminist critiques of political economy, such as that of feminist philosopher Nancy Hartsock, argue that the current moment of neoliberal globalization is a phase of accumulation by dispossession. Hartsock takes this concept, which describes processes of capitalist enclosures of former non-capitalist relations and resources, such as the introduction of women into the global market via microcredit, from human geographer David Harvey. Most importantly, she argues alongside Federici that these processes are deeply gendered. They are this way not only in terms of who is affected by these enclosures, but also in their very (ideological) structure. Stemming from Marx's account of primitive accumulation in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the concept shows the deep complicity of the state in providing for the needs of capital. Sociologist Maria Mies states that 'contemporary capitalism [in the nineteen-eighties] needs both colonies and housewives to serve as non-market sectors for its expansion.'[9] Mies called the discourses relegating women to the sphere of the household 'housewifisation'. Revealing another blind spot in most analyses of the global political economy, the feminization of work, political scientists and economist Brigitte Young says:

> If we focus on the practices that provide the infrastructure for the production and reproduction of global capital, we uncover a multiplicity of work cultures involving real people in real places. These include secretaries, pizza delivery persons, cleaning crews, truck drivers, dog walkers, industrial service workers, maids, child-care workers, and a host of other low-skilled, mostly 'blue-collar' workers who have become invisible in the narrative of hypermobile capital.[10]

For Hartsock, women (and their housewifisation) have become the model for the 'feminized, virtual workers demanded by contemporary global capitalism' in current times.[11] Besides this, Hartsock sees four dialectically interrelated processes of accumulation by dispossession. The most fundamental one is that primitive accumulation involves a transformation of social reproduction. Feminists regularly exhibit two processes going on in the Global North. On the one hand, care work as maintenance for the elderly and infirm is provided more and more by private enterprises under the pressure of making profits. These processes are becoming even more violent due to what feminist economist Mascha Madörin termed 'diverging productivities', meaning that the relative productivity of the care sector cannot increase as much as in other sectors of the economy or rather if it tries to, an immense loss in quality of the work will follow.[12] On the other hand, feminists show the huge amount of (care) work undergoing re-privatization. This concerns, for example, the high numbers of migrant domestic workers, working during an era of irregular un-free labor, or the fact that women have to somehow compensate the amount of work welfare states cared for before.

What a historical account of primitive accumulation like this shows us is that capitalism always needed non-capitalist spheres to survive and these spheres do still exist and are produced anew within the transformation of the organization of social reproduction. Enclosed are not only pre-existing non-capitalist spheres, but newly created ones, like the welfare state. Harvey says: '[...] Capitalism necessarily and always creates its own 'other'.'[13] These processes of enclosure are deeply gendered and have different effects for women and men, women and women. Following this there are two points that can be made. Firstly, class struggles are challenged by the cracks that always already went through them and the struggles fought in the domestic sphere. Putting the question of reproduction and care work at the center of social movements demands is central to limit the power of capital with respect to this sphere. Only if we do so, can the possibilities of creating strong self-reproducing movements and commons evolve. Secondly, seen like this, non-capitalist spheres of any kind (i.e., commons) are not implicitly subversive and they are always threatened by capitalist enclosures. Strategies of local resistance are therefore not necessarily effective counter hegemonic alternatives. Federici and Babagallo for example underline the need to not only organize alternative ways of survival but to explicitly politicize these struggles through i.e., networking. The question of how our reproduction as humans is organized has to

be central in every common. Political scientist Kevin van Meter states: 'In seeking to intervene in and abolish care work, as we develop systems of care-giving, it is necessary to draw a clear line between care work that is imposed and care giving strategies which we incorporate into our own communities. Radical movements need to struggle with both these areas.'[14]

When finding emancipatory strategies of caregiving, we have to take care not to reproduce the gendered and racialized division of labor in care work. And here as well, there is a rich history of feminist theory and practice working towards new ways of relating that involve less domination and appropriation of others. After an extensive analysis of the maleness of our societies and culture that does not allow for difference and that positions 'women [as commodities] on market', feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray tries to imagine a different social order and community: 'Interdependency between subjects is thus no longer reduced to questions of possessing, of exchanging or sharing objects, cash, or an already existing meaning. It is, rather, regulated by the constitution of [non-exploitative] subjectivity. The subject does not vest its own value in any form of property whatsoever. No longer is it objecthood, having or the cost of having that governs the becoming of a subject or subjects and the relation among them. They are engaged in a relationship from which they emerge altered, the objective being the accomplishment of their subjectivity while remaining faithful to their nature.'[15]

There is a flourishing world of artists and theorists that work on these kinds of imaginaries of caregiving and relating differently that should be part of debates and politics around commons. What this means for our everyday practices of commons and our communities needs to be explored further. This exploration will be different in different parts of the world and from different positions. For some people, both inside and outside of radical movements in the west, this might mean finding and building communities that practice caregiving and to challenge the norm of what it means to be active. For a precarious domestic worker this might mean finding a way out of her isolation, for self-sustainable community living this might mean the defence of this community and their means of subsistence.

The concept of the commons, as I hope to have shown, has the potential to be a ground of discussion for all the questions of (social) reproduction, different social imaginaries, relationality, and subjectivities touched upon in this essay. Moreover, Federici reminds us that the commoning of our material means of life is a powerful mechanism to create mutual bonds and collective interests that go beyond relations of abstract solidarity that are often practiced in radical movements. As capitalist social relations are deeply intertwined with patriarchal ones, every struggle from the perspective of politics of commons has to be a feminist one.

1 'Regeneracíon Vision Statement' Regeneracíon website, www.childcarenyc.mayfirst.org/?q=node/25.
2 See Manuel Yang and Jeffrey D. Howison, introduction to 'Commons, Class Struggle and the World' special issue, *borderlands e-journal* 11, no. 2 (2012), p. 1, www.borderlands.net.au/vol11no2_2012/yanghowison_commons.htm.
3 See Silvia Federici, 'Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation' in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (New York: PM Press, 2012).
4 See Massimo De Angelis, 'Crises, Movements and Commons' in 'commons, class struggle and the world' special issue, *borderlands e-journal* 11, no. 2 (2012), www.borderlands.net.au/vol11no2_2012/deangelis_crises.htm.
5 Camille Barbagallo and Silvia Federici, introduction to *The Commoner 15* (2012), www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/01-introduction.pdf.
6 Silvia Federici, 'Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint,' (lecture , Bluestockings Radical Bookstore, NY, 28 October 2006), www.inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint.
7 See David Bollier and Silke Helferich, eds., *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State* (Amherst, MA: Leveller Press, 2012).
8 Silvia Federici, 'Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation.'
9 Nancy Hartsock, 'Globalization and Primitive Accumulation: The Contributions of David Harvey's Dialectical Materialism,' in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*, Noel Castree and Derek Gregory, eds. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 185.
10 Brigitte Young, 'Globalization and Gender: A European Perspective' in *Gender and Work in Transition: Globalization in Western, Middle and Eastern Europe*, ed. Regina Becker-Schmidt (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2002), p. 315.
11 Nancy Hartsock, 'Globalization and Primitive Accumulation: The Contributions of David Harvey's Dialectical Materialism' p. 316.
12 Mascha Madörin, 'Das Auseinanderdriften der Arbeitsproduktivitäten: Eine Feministische Sicht' *Denknetz Jahrbuch* (2011): pp. 56–71.
13 David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.141.
14 Kevin Van Meter, 'To Care is to Struggle' *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 14, no. 1: p. 46,www.anarchiststudies.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/persp_v14n1.pdf.
15 Luce Irigaray, *I love to you. Sketch for a Felicity Within History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.127.