Community with Humans or Commoning with Nature

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I have been taking part in a working group set up by Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory to do research on the subject of local commons. When we started we were called the Community Economies Project under the J.K. Gibson-Graham model of community economies.[1] Soon we converged our focus on the commons but we kept using the terms 'commons' and 'communities' interchangeably. In what follows I differentiate the two concepts. I argue that 'community' is extensively used by (Dutch) government policymakers in enabling and (unduly) constraining the responses to austerity measures. The concept of community works well for the aims of larger governments, part of which is objectionable because it leads the attention away from the problems of ongoing dispossession and the act of fencing off material and natural resources from common stakeholders into private and state domains in creating conditional scarcity for a market economy. I use the concept of factors of production in making this point. This leads me to the conclusion that the language of communities misuses the segregated elements in factors of production by further dissociating them instead of uniting them for the sake of a wholesome and sustainable economy. I therefore propose to distinguish between 'commons' and 'community', support the notion of the commons more strongly, and for that matter suggest an *experiential* clarification of the concept of the commons that protects it from the contradictions of what is aptly dubbed *neo-liberal communitarianism*[2] in referring to governing populations through community in contrast to communities as autonomous entities.

I should explain the notion of factors of production before I move on. Factors of production are land, labor, and capital; they are prerequisites for production. This triangle is a basic tenet within classical political economy as well as neoclassical economics, with the occasional suggestion of a fourth factor: entrepreneurship. Karl Marx has refined the definition of these factors with scientific care and humanistic concern: labor (or human creative power), object of labor (nature to be transformed, utilized, commodified, that is, land, mines, energy, materials), and instruments of labor (means of production, both financial and technological, that is, money and machines). A different take on the part of neoclassical economists is the division of the trinity further up into sorts of labor and capital, showing a relative lack of interest in land and the natural environment. All the same, the notion of factors of production has been a durable conceptual apparatus for both liberal and critical political economists.

Capital, financial capital that is, must get due attention as well. Austerities and cuts in subsidies inflicting neighborhood communities – care work, job creation, education, cultural activities, and so forth – are strategies to open up space for the introduction and stimulation of private capital. These are further steps made towards dispossessing peoples and benefiting from the surplus of their labor.[3] At the same time the gatekeepers of capital find these domains too risky or uninteresting to place their financial bets on them. Community development programs, particularly those initiated by governments, jump in to close this gap. And in doing so they use language and methods that are appealing to both those who might benefit from these programs as well as investors. But in many cases there is no potential investment in sight. Even worse, in cases of communities mobilized around microcredit the groups are used as units of profit extraction instead of reinvestment and redistribution. It is through this mechanism of, first, dispossession, and then, financial scarcity and debt, that the greater population is compelled to sell its labor, its vital powers. For these reasons, community development has often proven to serve as an instrument to organize this exploitation of labor.

Now, the whole notion of the isolation of these three key factors illuminated above can be questioned from the point of view of the commons. First the most important commons token is the fundamental separation of humans from the soil and their environment, and second, the preventing of humans from possessing their own vital forces through the segregation of labor from (surplus) value, that is, financial capital.[4] The commons point of view would be critical of these

segregations. In contrast, the notion of community and community development operate within this separation. To discursively protect the commons from falling prey to such divisions I advocate a distinctive and more autonomous language that fits the logic of the commons different from that of the community.[5] In general I propose that we be aware of the following differences between the commons language and communities language:

Commons	Communities
Centers on experience Embedded in nature, including other humans	Human-centered (anthropocentric) Embedded in social reality
Connectivity of the subject to her environment and nature, quality of the connection is the basis of stakeholding and right to co-govern	*Connectivity* among human members of the community (network connectivity). Dyadic mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion determine stakeholding rights and voice
Sustenance and *creative process* continuously occurring within the commons, its human and non-human members	*Productive labor* leads to value only when it is recognized by the community, traditionally and ultimately through remuneration
Centrality of the issue of governance through the recognition and assembly of all members	*Centrality* of the issue of economy through development: initiatives, innovations, and business opportunities

Let me, for practicality's sake, focus on one model of community development: the asset-based community development model was set up by social policy scholars John Kretzmann and John L. McKnight at Northwestern University, Illinois in the US. It is a model strategy to mobilize communities around the assets of individuals and groups. Later I will make mention of the community economies model as an example of susceptibility to 'contamination' by official and segregating discourses.[6]

The most important precursor to the asset-based model is local economic development in 'low-income countries'. While it is not central, it is typical of such models that external agents, traditionally well-educated westerners engaging with the 'underdeveloped world', spot potential communities and decide to engage in developing their powers to make them fit for a global economy, that is, to become ready for the international markets for labor and consumption. Although these models are not evidently forced upon target groups they do work through indigenous social relations and the already present temptations of modern life to achieve aims that are external to the mobilized communities, a process that I would call *soft imposition*.

In approaching communities these models generally assume some sort of shortcoming or lag in the target groups.[7] Otherwise, there is no need whatsoever to approach them. This assumption does have some truth to it; such communities are made up of people who have been dispossessed as a result of long histories of colonial domination, state violence, and/or enclosure. This history is not in the distant past, however. It gathers pace in nineteenth-century Europe and even earlier in England, with land enclosures and the expulsion of peasants from common lands, and the separation of the means of production from the now-laborers in urban areas. And in the more recent decades of the twentieth century we witness the privatization of (Dutch) housing cooperatives.[8]

In the monetary domain, financial dispossession has steadily progressed through the stagnation of real wages in relation to inflation, and interest rates higher for credit than for savings and earnings. While this should mean that the purchasing power of consumers drops and causes macroeconomic problems, the structure is palliated by the growth of consumer credit capital resulting in greater levels of consumption without even ownership of what is consumed. Consumer credit has done the mere job of exacerbating dispossession and aggravating greater wealth inequality in the long term.

But the assumption of communities as 'underdeveloped' is discursively contradicted by the language with phrases such as 'stay positive' and 'focus on the assets/solutions not the problems.'[9] This vernacular's psychological power would be frugal if (and I am being sarcastic here) it had come into practice a few centuries earlier when the colonial agents and ruling elites developed a sophisticated

view of indigenous communities as well as the labor force as savage, barbarian, incapable of *governing* themselves, and undeveloped: a view apologetic of the practice of appropriation of the right to govern and mobilize labor/biopower as the governments and corporations please.

Now, the positive language of asset-based community development focuses on what people already have, but does not mention that communities can and should have rights to land, natural resources, and the surplus of their labor. Basically, the responsible parties have shirked the responsibility to be *active* in making up for the past, that is, encouraging the redistribution of wealth and commoning of nature. Instead the mistakes are hidden behind a language of positivity and de-responsibilization[10] of government and through a language of optimism and an unwillingness to even discuss the policy domains of financial markets, real estate, and housing. This lack of historical responsibility compels the government to constrict its policy and policy language to domains that hide and silence past mistakes, leading further to solutions that are not fit to the mission but rather serve to protect the government and so require a host of artificial techniques to sell the policies to people and businesses.

Specifically, in tackling both material and financial problems with social and discursive engineering, governments use a language that masks the widening gap between the three traditional factors of production since governments are unwilling to negotiate private property rights, realty market governance, financial market policies, and the rules for capital. 'Community development' provides this kind of language. It focuses on skills and labor mobilization, omitting the land and capital factor. 'Asset' is unselfconsciously used to create an aura of economic and productive importance but is cut down in substance to mean only individual capacities. At times an 'asset' can be an unintelligent policy word referring to such obvious life affairs as eating together and everyday exchanges of business ideas and information.

For what they mean on the ground, the results of asset-based projects such as collective gardening, cooking, forest watching, and cultural activities remain too marginal to be sufficient to support the domestic economy of the community members. Significant parts of the livelihood of communities must still be sustained through the mainstream but problem-ridden job market, where the unhappily married and divorced couple of capital and labor ought to meet.

So, there is a lot of talk, many a catchy phrase, and some positive and silencing PR and social engineering. To me, the irony of getting people together in communities surfaces against the background of 50 or so years of individualistic/core family architecture of housing and urban planning. That is, social engineering through community development is tackling a problem that is literally set in stone, in individualistic architecture and commercially led urban planning, and yet it considers the lack of community a problem of mere social relations devoid of material and environmental counterparts.

Currently, the asset-based community development model is promoted by municipal Dutch governments within their own territories whilst the last material facilities for neighborhood communities, that is, community buildings [*buurthuizen*] are vanishing. There is the official perception that neighborhoods are in need of being organized into self-responsible and self-sufficient communities in the process of adapting to the economic crisis and the prerogative to steadily cut more and more in public spending. Community development projects have successfully become the placeholders for the solution (alongside cooperatives for those groups with fair amounts of savings). Many of these projects are joyful and even helpful to the participants of these programs. Those are opportunities for sharing and finding relief. They might also be gateways to jobs and other cooperative activities. But without other forms of action and change in proprietary relations, the housing market, or even urban and architectural design and financial legislation, the reach of the strategy and the results remain a far cry from sustainable development, economic revitalization, creation of equity, or any other long-term governmental mission. Simply then, the problems are fundamental but the actions remain systematically marginal.

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The research field devoted to critical economic geographer Katherine Gibson's notion of community economies shows an interesting contrast to asset-based community development. It is inspired by critical studies of economic geography. The case studies form an amalgam of non-capitalist, non-capitalocentric mixtures of social organization, access to natural resources,

and systems of value circulation. This body of research establishes a discourse that counters free market arguments for private property, efficiency and growth. The force of this literature is its support of existing commons and endangered economies. However, and unfortunately, when shifting focus to the creation of new commons governance, the literature uncritically imitates the ideas of asset-based development. At least, to my surprise, Gibson, has co-authored a 'resource toolkit' for 'communities and economies' together with political and economic geographer Jenny Cameron, using the practical guides provided by Kretzmann and McKnight.[11]

Although it makes a difference when the toolkit is used by independent actors (governing from within communities) rather than government actors or those working on government assignment, asset-based community development could be leading the attention away from political issues of natural resource access rights and indebtedness. In practical terms, community economy projects might proceed very well, as with examples of communities that end up owning community buildings or businesses that sustain the majority of the members' lives. But these are cases in which the community has acted beyond the models of community development and it remains hard to judge whether the community development logic has been the driving force behind the success. So it is good to be cautious and not limit oneself to the recommendations of the model and the toolkit. It would be even better to nurture one's own language that emanates confidence rather than self-limiting caution.

As of yet I haven't encountered any practical guides that mobilize the community economies discourse instead of borrowing its language from asset-based development. This might well be because the objects of the commons can be too diverse to allow for a general practical guide; it can range from solid materials, to realty, air, or intangible goods such as intellectual produce and digital creations. So, the diversity within alternative economies mapped until now may be a hindrance to developing such general commons strategy models and make it difficult to come with attractive alternative guides that can become placeholder of the misleading elements of community development strategies used to do. It might even be unwise to pretend that a unified walkthrough is possible. A website like www.community-wealth.org demonstrates the variety of strategies and models proposed in organizing commons all too well, though they also put community-based models on their list. But unless the language of the commons takes over that of the placeholder, the community development models and other official discourses will keep capturing the imagination of the civil society.

So, if you grant me a change of style and an intervention into my own text, I try to imagine a common starting point that should then capture the imagination in a manner more attuned to the commons, and one that splits off from such official government models of community development: an immediate phenomenology of human environment using a simple imaginary example.[12] I propose that this is congruent with theorist Bruno Latour's attempt to compose a common world, worked out on a smaller and more immediate scale.[13]

You and the Sidewalk, Starting to Assemble a Common

The moment you start strolling along the sidewalk, you are doing something that has nothing to do with property and law. You are doing something in the realm of the natural commons. This sounds redundant, but it is not. An official government (a government that thinks that governing should happen in an office) would say that the sidewalk is made possible by governmental planning, finance, and organization. This is untrue. The sidewalk is made by street makers, tile makers, miners, engineers, dwellers, and street frequenters, and the possibilities of material nature. Whoever else has been involved in the process of making the sidewalk, whether official or informal, is redundant and has possibly obstructed it.

The moment your soles touch the pavement, you are engaging with the commons, a minimal common at least, regardless of the claims officials make about it. Yet you, earth, space, nature, and history are already working to create this. The fact that you are a user/consumer connects you to the pavement, but you should not forget that you can break out of the historical construction of consumerism and relate to the pavement in richer dimensions than only its consumption.14 You can contribute to the sidewalk, decorate it, repair it, redesign it, thank it, or use it as a gathering space, dancing venue, or site. You can start managing or governing it.

An example in Bingen, Germany of the multi-city, multi-artist project *Dispatch Work,* courtesy of Jan Vormann. Art can provide a good justification, through aesthetic responsibility and artistic rapport, for intervention in public space. In this case it actually repairs a structure. Even the strongest governments can lack capacity for street maintenance, since financial resources for employing people as servicemen are limited. But the pleasure of creatively contributing to a common is unlimited and almost universally present.

Image of the occupation of Taksim Gezi Park, Istanbul, 2013. In this case the popular intervention into governmental measures pushing for urban real estate development projects is massive, intensive, and even violence-ridden due to the near absolute exclusion of those who have rights to inhabit and govern this public space, from those official communities who take the power to make decisions about it. Yet the work in this image is artful and material, and provides an example that can help extend the imagination of sidewalk governance to current and relevant cases.

Community is not a prerequisite for a sidewalk, though communities emerge around efforts to assemble and maintain them. Communities are the results of living in a common world and the recognition that there is need for collective government. In actual fact this community of the sidewalk already exists, only it is currently bound to a number of segregations by law, policy, space, and communication lines that might need rethinking.

When you intervene, some officials notice your action and say, “You may not do that. That would make the sidewalk dissonant with the rest of the urban planning.”

“Oh, right,” you say. “I’m gonna talk with the whole street to agree on a *consonant* pavement. Thanks for the tip.”

Still, they say, you cannot change the sidewalk because you may not.

You say you can learn all the things that the government knows about sidewalks, help those who are already involved with it, and skip all the unnecessary papers and inefficiencies so that the sidewalk is at least as good as the government gets it.

They say you cannot because you don’t own the sidewalk or have no official decree.

You say they don’t own it either; no one does. And you have a decree because it gives you pleasure and room for movement! Why should they not be happy that people care about it? They complain that people don’t care but hold you back because they haven’t given you permission in the first place!

So, one crucial difference between how the sidewalk is assembled now, or for instance how food is distributed, or any commons for that matter, and how that should change – be reassembled – is the recognition of the unity of the world, the fact that society and nature are not as segregated as one is schooled to think in a liberal political economy built on self-interest, a connectivity sourced in a psycho-economic desire for, not material things of life, but for liquidated, abstracted, wealth.

As long as communities are based on such abstract commonalities, there will remain a relation of exclusion and *exploitation* between communities, a relationship that is volatile and hence unsustainable. Leaving the language of communities behind allows one to see what is even more important: the assembly of whomever and whatever is involved in the commons, and connecting urban planners to dwellers, creating inter-communal communication, or governance by recognition, instead of governmentalizing the already existing communities of planners on the one side and dwellers on the other, or the capitalists versus the poor.

There is of course government in the commons – procedures, meetings, surveys, investigations, strategies, enforcements, education, and so on. There exists nature as well as human affairs, yet these are inseparable. So you are part of the commons. Thank you for your effort, government official. But we need to talk about ways of doing and representing things differently, ways in which there is the recognition that we have a right to nature because we are part of it, not because you have a paper that says it is someone’s property.

A change in strategy for those who are struggling for the cause of the commons would then be: recognize currently existing communities of government, but deny their exclusive rights and claim your involvement and strife for the recognition of your experience of the common world. This is the alternative that I am suggesting we fold into the models of community development so that the real problem of the connection to the common world is tackled instead of the non-issue of immobilized social relations.

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The language of community development has quite a few discontents. Yet even in the most critical circles the language of community has found popular currency. Surely, small community projects revive a sense of room for action after experiences of un-reinforcing activism and previous frustration with social change. But rather than deepening the community development model’s implications for economic reform in the domain of real estate, natural rights, finance, and the labor market, everywhere community is used to support ever shallower practices. The language of community moves away from the existing and very sustainable and powerful communities of government, be they those borne of the market, that is, corporations that maintain a hold on abstracted value, finance, or of the state, holding power over strategically vital and tangible commons by maintaining and aggravating the divide between the factors of production.

The language of the commons, on the other hand, and especially when considered as integrally connected to immediate experience, can produce quite different outcomes. Within this language, the factors of production are not divided to establish a ruling elite. After all, production is not only human-driven, but spreads across the physical world. Since production and value creation is commonplace, however, production self-evidently plays a key role in common governance. The stark difference and improvement would be that the divisions between the factors of labor, nature, and capital, might be abolished through recognizing the experiential immediacy of the world within governance programs. Understanding this is essential, both in strategic and intellectual respects. The language of the commons is not one that creates new divisive lines, but rather perceives the position of natural objects and human beings in space and without borders. It imports the idea of dispersed governing and production. The starting point of this otherwise large-as-life subject lies then in the immediate experience of a wholesome, however heterogeneous world, and not with an external agent who comes to bind people together without giving them that which binds them, nor the precedence and primacy of rule and regulation over experience. The starting point is the experienced common world.

1 Community economies are defined in a paradigmatic sense and are opposed to 'capitalocentric economies': 'The community economy is a normative representation of the diverse economy…In a community economy our interdependence with each other is recognized and respected as we negotiate: what is necessary to personal, social and ecological survival, how social surplus is appropriated and distributed, whether and how social surplus is to be produced and consumed, [and] how a commons is produced and sustained.' 'Key Ideas', Community Economies, www.communityeconomies.org/Home/Key-Ideas.

2 Friso van Houdt and Willem Schinkel, 'The double helix of cultural assimilationism and neo-liberalism: citizenship in contemporary governmentality', *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 4 (2010): p. 698

3 See David Bollier, *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of our Common Wealth* (London: Routledge, 2003).

4 See Andreas Weber, 'The economy of the wastefulness: the biology of the commons', in *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, ed. David Bollier and Silke Helferich (Amherst, MA: Leveller Press, 2012), www.wealthofthecommons.org/essay/economy-wastefulness-biology-commons.

5 By language I mean discourse in the Foucauldian sense, language as it is interconnected with practices, interests, givens, truth, and so on. I choose to focus on discourse analysis for the sake of clarity. But the basic problem of the 'contamination' of language is no mere linguistic and hygienic affair as I otherwise implicate in this text. It is the contamination of logic of practice and historical consciousness, *expressed* through language, by the enforcement logic of the government through networks of subsidy, law, and policy. Basically, community development is a government policy in governing from without – not an effort from within – the commons.

6 To get better acquainted with the community economies concept you might want to visit www.communityeconomies.org.

7 Compare Schinkel and Van Houdt's 'latently present but not actualized' communities in *The double helix of cultural assimilationism and neo-liberalism: citizenship in contemporary governmentality*, p. 700.

8 Law Professor James Boyle remarks that there is no one movement but a series of enclosures starting in the fifteenth century. See Boyle's 'The second enclosure movement and the construction the public domain', *Law and Contemporary Problems* 66 (Winter–Spring 2003): pp. 33–74,www.scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1273&context=lcp; also see an extended critical study of enclosure by J.M. Neeson. *Commoners: common rights, enclosure, and social change in England, 1700–1820*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

9 A popular critique of this culture of positivity, its corporate and economic sources, is presented by political activist Barbara Ehrenreich. For a particularly animated presentation of her arguments see her lecture 'Smile or Die', RSA, 17 March 2010, www.thersa.org/events/rsaanimate/animate/rsa-animate-smile-or-die.

10 'De-responsibilization' implies the shifting of burdens of responsibility for whatever domain of societal care from the shoulders of government and tax collectors onto those of citizens and individuals. The abhorrent part is that while the responsibility for care is displaced, government and tax collectors continue to hold a monopoly on financial and organizational capacity, and permission to act.

11 Jenny Cameron and Katherine Gibson, *Shifting Focus: Alternative Pathways for Communities and Economies* (Latrobe City: Monash University, 2001).

12 In the second part of this paper I use the notion of government differently. I previously spoke of government in the sense of official government and its subsidiaries. Now I add a second meaning by melting the notion of government, making it fluid, detaching it from the location of the office and attaching it to ubiquitous *acts* of governing. The meaning becomes apparent as you read on.

13 Bruno Latour, 'Waiting for Gaia. Composing the common world through arts and politics' (lecture, launch of SPEAP, French Institute, London, 21 November 2011).

14 Consumerism has corrupted our relationship with material objects. For a re-appreciation of the value of the material world Andrew Simms and Ruth Potts introduce the term "New Materialism". See Andrew Simms, *The New Materialism: How Our Relationship with the World can Change for the Better*, ed. Ruth Potts and Kate Potts (London: Real Press, 2012). 'The New Materialism' is also the name of their manifesto available online here www.dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/77684614/thenewmaterialism_241112.pdf.