

Book Review

Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism. By Massimo De Angelis. London: Zed Books, 2017, 436p. (paperback) ISBN 9781783600625. US List \$25.00.

In the search for alternatives to capitalism, the commons paradigm has emerged as a promising way forward. With roots in the pioneering work of Elinor Ostrom (1990), the commons paradigm has gained considerable attention for offering a conceptual framework for understanding the variety and complexity of institutions for collective action, building community trust, mutual aid, and common pool resource management outside of the binary of state provision or market-based development. While Ostrom's work attracted widespread attention – earning her the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009 – much of the scholarship influenced by Ostrom's work has been aimed at gaining greater legal, social, and economic recognition of commons-based projects. Those scholars focused on the potential of such projects to facilitate engines of economic growth or bring about new political subjectivities. Critical scholars working within this tradition, however, have explored the ways in which the systems and subjectivities of commons-based movements clash or intersect with broader circuits of capital accumulation. By exploring the radical potential of commons-based social movements, the goal was to explore the emancipatory potential of the commons to bring about a postcapitalist future. This is the context that frames Massimo De Angelis's recent work.

By combining systems theory (Luhmann, 1995), cybernetics (Maturana & Varela, 1998) and Marxist political economy (Marx, 1976; Dalla Costa & James, 1975), De Angelis's task is to demonstrate how the commons can be understood as a system capable of bringing about a social revolution through ongoing iterations of commoning activity that are reproduced over time. Rather than arguing that such a revolution is imminent, however, he takes an epochal approach by focusing on how an emergent alternative value system like the commons have the potential to bring about a change in social relations. Just as capitalist social relations and subjectivities emerged in the feudal era, De Angelis views the commons as a similarly emergent value system responding to

the excesses and exploitative tendencies of capitalism. His analysis unfolds across ten chapters, which are grouped into four conceptual parts. What emerges is an iterative argument that is both analytical and personal. By the end of the book, the reader is left with a conceptual framework for understanding commons-based social movements, their inherent contradictions, and a proposal for how to bring about a commons-based social revolution to move toward a postcapitalist future.

De Angelis begins by defining commons as systems and identifies their central characteristics and elements. Whereas Marx began his analysis of capitalism with the commodity form and its dual characteristics of use value and exchange value, De Angelis begins his project with an analysis of common goods. Common goods, in his view, also have both a dual character with both objective and subjective qualities: they provide a use value for a plurality (objective), and feature a plurality claiming and sustaining ownership of the common good by creating a relational value to the goods (subjective). This dual characteristic of common goods can also provide the basis for commons systems, as the relationship between the plurality and the goods also reproduces social relations among the people. However, the specific form of the common good and the specific subjectivities produced by those claiming ownership over the resource (commoners) are left open since they are subject to the specific contexts within which they arise and are determined by the plurality of commoners engaged in commoning activity.

De Angelis extends his analysis throughout the next two parts by bringing contributions from radical and feminist political economy to bear on the work of Elinor Ostrom. He focuses on how the commons – and the diversity of institutional forms established for their governance – often encounter broader circuits of capital and/or state accumulation. These encounters lead to the appropriation, enclosure, destruction, or the imposition of artificial scarcity upon the resource. Key to overcoming these threats and ensuring the survival of the commons is social reproduction or the reproduction of commoning power. Here, he incorporates feminist critiques of Marx that emerged in the 1970s during the wages for housework campaign (see Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Cox and Federici, 1975; Federici, 2012) by demonstrating how circuits of capital/commons production are sustained by a circuit of social reproduction. Having established this expanded circuit of commons production, he continues in part three by focusing specifically on the activity of commoning. In De Angelis's view, commoning is the site of struggle that contains the potential for bringing about a social revolution. It is here that 'commoning brings to life the essential social elements of the commons,' (203) especially because such activity is embedded in the everyday practice of doing in common – of actively creating new subjectivities and reproducing them over time. How to scale these activities up so that they constitute a real challenge to state and capital is the focus on the final portion of the book.

In part four, De Angelis focuses on how a social revolution might develop. He positions commoners – any member of a plurality claiming ownership over common goods and contributing to its sustainability, whether currently or historically – as a class, and frames the wide range of their activities as a developing form of social power that is founded on an alternative value system to capital. Through the multiplication of commoning activity and the interweaving of commons-based communities through 'boundary commoning,' a commons movement may ultimately lead to a tipping point at which social transformation is possible occurs. In this final section, he also comments on how commons movements can link with social movements to form a hybrid movement with the combined power to bring about social revolution. As he explains, these 'are not

movements of fragmented subjectivities sharing a particular passion, but movements of connected subjectivities whose connection is further increased by their social movement.’ (387).

De Angelis’s book is a significant contribution to our understanding of the commons, particularly as it concerns the intersection between the commons and capitalism. The book is likely to be appealing to those working within critical traditions across disciplines, but primarily those within media and communication studies, sociology, and economics. The true strength of the argument comes through in at least three ways. First, the analysis of the commons value circuit as an alternative to capital accumulation provides a clear analytical tool for understanding the way that commons systems operate. Second, and as an extension of the first point, De Angelis’s engagement with Marxist-feminist literature on social reproduction reminds us that no production – whether capitalist or commons-based – is possible without the ability to sustain productive capacities over time. He is then able to incorporate these concerns into his commons circuit. Third, De Angelis’s work revitalizes the notion of a social revolution. His long-term view on the need to transform social relations refocuses our attention on creating new subjectivities based on mutual aid, care, trust, and conviviality at all levels in an unfolding process of revolution.

However, some may find his combination of systems theory with critical political economy somewhat problematic, especially since some systems theorists used their ideas to justify non-interference in the economic system (see Fuchs, 2008; 2002). De Angelis is attempting to recover the analytical strengths of systems thinking by flavoring it with a far more politically progressive agenda. What emerges, despite this theoretical tension, is a clear path forward for those engaged in commons struggles against capital and state enclosures. His is a work that deserves to be read, and he reminds us that progressive political action is urgent and necessary across all levels of engagement, whether it is introducing an individual to the commons for the first time, the sustenance of micro-commons like the family or community, or broad-based political action against the state and capital.

References

- Cox N & Federici S (1975) *Counter-planning from the kitchen: Wages for housework: A perspective on capital and the left*. New York: New York Wages for Housework Committee.
- Dalla Costa M & James S (1975) *The power of women and the subversion of the community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press
- Federici S (2012) *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Fuchs C (2008) *Internet and society: Social theory in the information age*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fuchs C (2002) INTAS Project "Human Strategies in Complexity" Research Paper No. 4. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=385185> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.385185>
- Luhmann N (1995) *Social systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Marx K (1976) *Capital: A critique of political economy, Vol. I*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Maturana HR & Varela FJ (1998) *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*.

Boston, MA: Shambhala.

Ostrom E (1990) *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Benjamin J Birkinbine
University of Nevada, Reno