



## **Omnia Sunt Communia — On the Commons and the Transformation to Post Capitalism. By Massimo De Angelis**

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## Book Review

# Omnia Sunt Communia — On the Commons and the Transformation to Post Capitalism

By Massimo De Angelis

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In 1982, the ecological economist Hazel Henderson developed a conceptualisation of the full economy by picturing a cake with four layers. (see Henderson, 1991, p.30). The top layer, and the only one with icing, was the private sector; the second layer, of similar size, was the public sector; the third layer — of similar size to the first two — was the non-monetised sector (for example: mutual aid, volunteering, DIY, household work, social care, sharing, local food growing, community services and other forms of unpaid work); and the bottom layer was the environmental sphere (including atmosphere, water courses, oceans, forests, and farmland). The cake illustrated perfectly the ecological and socially reproductive foundations of planetary life.

Still to this day the bottom two layers do not figure in calculations of GDP, yet nobody would deny that half of the cake is a commons underpinning what alone is monetised, counted and valued as economic in the top two layers. Henderson developed this analysis as a critique of the myopia of the neoliberal policies, unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan.

In 1968, Garrett Hardin produced a paper in *Science* magazine arguing that the commons was a legacy bound to fade away. He took the example of pastureland in common and argued this to be an intrinsically flawed method of production because every herdsman had the incentive to put more animals on the land inevitably causing overgrazing, erosion and a loss of soil productivity. He concluded, therefore, that that private ownership was the only economically efficient system. Hardin's paper became World Bank policy and has advanced a decline of commons.

After years of fieldwork, Elinor Ostrom published in 1990 her critique of Hardin's (1968) 'tragedy of the commons' theory by showing working examples of commons modes of production globally including community managed forests in Switzerland and Japan, common fisheries in the Philippines and water management commons in Spain and New Mexico. These commons have been resilient over decades and in some cases for centuries. From these and many other natural resources stewardship models, Ostrom undermined the theory of Hardin and showed his blind-spot. Essentially a viable commons is comprised of three operational elements: a common resource (material or immaterial), a community of stakeholders and an agreed set of rules to discipline and exclude free riders, shirkers and privatisers. Hardin failed to distinguish between an open resource (like the global oceans) without guardians and a genuine commons. Ostrom made history by becoming the first woman to win the Nobel prize in economics for her commons theory.

Ostrom developed her governance of the commons research to tease out eight core design principles. These have resonance with the seven co-operative principles. De Angelis celebrates the analytical systems of Ostrom, but explores more widely the growing clash between enclosing forces of corporations and the pushback of commoners and solidarity co-operatives. The book is the result of several years of research and discussions with commoners in Italy, the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, Croatia, the USA, South Africa, Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru (p. xii).

De Angelis provides numerous examples and tells the story of Cochabamba, Bolivia. From the early 1980s, urbanisation grew fast in Bolivia, with Cochabamba the country's third largest

city (p. 305). Rural migrants settled in the south of the city, but had no access to water. Over decades, collaborative work involving community water associations and co-operatives with some assistance from non-government organisations (NGOs) assistance mobilised massive amounts of sweat equity to develop communal systems and sink wells. This also included providing sewage services and extensive pipework to service a growing number of neighbourhoods housing tens of thousands of people. Labour to run these community co-operatives was unpaid and based on community organising and rotating jobs to operate the system. This ensured water for household needs at affordable prices.

The World Bank agreed to refinance a foreign loan if Bolivia agreed to privatise the country's water and utility services. An international consortium of corporations won the contract and were guaranteed a 15 per cent annual rate of profit over 40 years. The national law implemented required the commons systems to meter their water and hand over the revenue to the corporations. This triggered a water war of civil unrest and months of battles between outraged citizens, civil society organisations and the trade unions.

The uprising kicked off in Cochabamba in 2000, and spread fast to other cities and towns. A general strike and pitched battles eventually forced the repeal of the law and the cancellation of the privatisation contract. The success of organised commoners led to the fall of the government and, in 2005, the presidential election of Evo Morales, an activist in the campaign.

Similarly attempts in Ecuador through a national law to nationalise the commons water systems led to a rebellion in Cuenca that spread. Years of struggle against privatisation efforts forced the government to retreat and an alternative law, the Junta de Agua was passed that recognises the rights of communities to plan, design and develop water system commons. In Italy, during the same period of these Water Wars, an attempt by Berlusconi to privatise water was defeated in Naples and other cities by a commons movement.

De Angelis points out that a strength of these water commons movements is their self-conscious resistance and success in saying 'No' to enclosure. A fundamental weakness, however, has been their inability to move beyond resistance to build and connect with other commons to co-construct a wider mode of production to meet other basic needs, including need for democratic housing, social care, energy and local food.

To highlight the wider potential, De Angelis points to the 'iceberg model' (pp. 313-314) as an economic representation of forms of 'provisioning' developed by eco-feminists (see Gibson-Graham, 2006; and Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003). This analogy portrays wage labour for corporate capital to be the tip of the iceberg. Below this tip, in any country globally, are richly diverse and resilient unseen forms of work not carried out within capitalist firms and encompassing mutual aid, household work, self-provisioning, social care, work by the retired, trade union work, self-employment, work in the co-operative sector, etc. De Angelis cites a study in Canada over 20 years ago that estimated the annual contribution to GDP of unpaid work as \$284.9 billion (p. 314). De Angelis also highlights the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2013) research appraising costs of reproducing labour by parents through education, training and care services as ranging from 10 to 39 per cent of GDP (p. 190).

The international work on the Food Commons is probably the most developed area of activism. Activists in Latin America coined the term 'buen vivir' (good living) to describe the mission of the commons movements. Industrialised farming's destruction of forests, soil structure, the pollution of water courses, corporate enclosure of seeds, the promotion of GMO and land grabs in developing countries are meeting growing opposition. Agroecology is a mounting international resistance movement and de Angelis focuses on the concept of food sovereignty to illustrate this. Since the mid 1990s, La Via Campesina has become a global network promoting the Food Commons alternative. This movement includes 164 local and national organisations in 73 countries and about 200 million farmers and food production members (p. 282). Their mission set out in the Declaration of Nyéléni is food sovereignty and people's rights to culturally appropriate and healthy food from ecologically sound methods (see [www.nyeleni.org](http://www.nyeleni.org)).

For a European example of food commons, de Angelis provides a profile of the work of Campi Aperti, Bologna (p. 294) that from the late 1990s has developed a growing co-operative network of five regular community supported agriculture markets. For each market, a monthly general assembly is held with consumer and farmer members to co-manage the food commons. Bimonthly general assemblies are held bringing members of all five markets together. Farmers are guaranteed a fair trade price, set by members of each market. The assured quality of the local food, the treatment of the animals and the land is vetted and inspected by the consumer members. Local and organic food produced includes fruit, vegetables, herbs, pasta, cheese, meat, as well as flowers, oils, soap and detergents, seedlings and beverages. Today the system has expanded to an organic growing acreage approaching 250 hectares and equivalent to a food growing area close to Bologna of 300 large Premier league football pitches (see [www.campiaperti.org](http://www.campiaperti.org)).

In other northern Italian cities (including Milan and Venice) and regions (Val di Susa) farmers and consumers have joined a national network called Genuino Clandestino that is replicating the commons (chapter 8). Campi Aperti has developed a solidarity economy partnership in Bologna and under the City's radical new by-law (the Bologna regulation for 'the commons') the co-operatives have negotiated a lower rate of 5 per cent of trade for market space which is half the city's conventional charge.

De Angelis examines other commons, including the Solidarity Clinics in Greece and shows how the growing awareness of commons (including Wikipedia, free software, Creative Commons Licensing; our cultural inheritance, public spaces, libraries, museums; car sharing, etc.) is informing a new set of political alliances to overcome austerity. Bologna and Barcelona are in the forefront of innovative policies by local government to recognise, nurture and support the emergence and development of a co-operative commons economy. As De Angelis observes, not all co-operatives are commons. To be a commons, co-production by stakeholders, non-hierarchical practices and active democratic member involvement in planning, designing, developing and co-managing the commons is crucial. Most importantly, commons need self-consciously and strategically to unite to co-develop a new integrated mode of production for people and planet.

Given the dominance of the state and market duopoly, political conflicts go with the territory. The major difference that De Angelis shows is between commons and capital. Capital is driven by a mission to develop shareholder value and expand capital. For commons, money is a servant and not a master as its mission is to develop commonwealth not commodities. Historically the co-operative movement has pursued the development of co-operative commonwealth as its mission, but this vision and mission has been for too long neglected. De Angelis shows powerfully how to revive this radical mission for meeting a growing range of basic needs in the 21st century.

## The Reviewer

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