Commoning to Commons: On Transformative Practice and the Politics of Everyday Life. In Dialogue with Jonathan Metzger and Stavros Stavrides.

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This conversation introduces commoning as a relational and transformative practice shaping urban life. Moving beyond fixed models, it reflects on how commons emerge through collective negotiation, ethical struggle, and more-than-human entanglements. The exchange revolves around the themes of *ethics*, *institutions*, *openness*, and *urban space*, addressing the challenges of maintaining openness without reproducing exclusion. Grounded in lived experiences and critical theory, the conversation highlights commoning as an ongoing practice of building shared ground across differences, creating possibilities for reimagining social cooperation beyond ownership and extraction. The conversation took place on 14 April 2025 online. The transcript has been edited for clarity and coherence, while retaining the relational spirit of the original exchange.

Ethics

Stefania Ragozino, Tihomir Viderman, and Chiara Belingardi: Let's start by examining ethics in and around commons. What it means if commons are conceptualized in opposition to the state or rather as small hardly visible change to urban experience? Are the commons meant to replace existing structures or to fill perceived voids? What kind of society might be built with and through the commons?

Jonathan Metzger*:* That's a great place to begin. We could easily spend days unpacking this question – it really is that central. But maybe what's most important is how we talk about the commons. Often, when academics point to conceptual confusion, it is to clear the way for a 'correct' definition. However, I think that this confusion can be productive. It keeps the concept open, generative, and connected to multiple forms of struggle and imagination. While a lot of discussions still draws on Elinor Ostrom's important framework, I think more recent

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conversations have expanded the field in useful, relational ways. Your question proposes a few contrasts: commons as oppositional to the state, or as small, often invisible shifts in everyday urban life. I would add another common framing: commons in opposition to private property, as an alternative to enclosure. What interests me in relation to this is the distinction between the commons and the commoners, which in many traditional models is taken as granted. Commons are seen as natural resources, something non-human, while commoners are seen as people managing or extracting from these resources. The focus then becomes, how the value is extracted sustainably, what governance system can ensure that the natural resource is not depleted. But I think we need to trouble that separation. Rather than dividing between two fixed entities – non-human resources and humans – I approach commons as an ecology of heterogeneous relations made up of humans and non-humans. Such a conceptualization opens a wider field of consideration, not only of who benefits, but also of who and what is harmed. It invites us to look at interdependences, to recognize the harms we might do to non-humans, and to think about commoning as an ongoing, ethical process, not just a question of access or value production.

Stavros Stavrides: My approach to the commons insists on the verb rather than the noun. It's not just about the commons as a defined thing, but about commoning as an active and open-ended process. I am interested in the potentialities inherent in this process, how it can challenge existing relations of power and ownership. Historically, there have been different forms of commons. Some of them preceded capitalist or market relations; belonged to traditional society mentalities. My entry point is to explore these experiences in search of pathways beyond exploitation and extraction, which I see as the dominant characteristics of the societies we live in today. These societies, whether capitalist or hybrids of capitalism and feudalism, are grounded in systems that exploit and extract. Not that commoning would automatically transcend that, but it carries a momentum, a potential. It gestures toward different ways of living: toward equality, mutual care, and shared responsibility. These are not just abstract ethical values. They can guide actual practices that challenge dominant governance models.

To be clear, I don't believe that commoning is simply an alternative form of economic arrangement. If it is to be taken seriously as a project of collective emancipation, it must challenge both the market and the state. The capitalist state is not the only form of state that has existed, just as the capitalist market is not the only form of market we've known. Commoning must create the conditions for non-hierarchical relations, where care, responsibility, and the sharing of power become central, thus challenging the idea that the state is the inevitable form through which societies must be governed. This also means attending to non-human relations, becoming, in a sense, tenders of land, as some indigenous populations in Latin America describe it. Their relationship with nature is not grounded in ownership (land is not a commodity), but in reweaving connections with the more-than-human world in ethical and non-extractive ways.

JM: Stavros's inspiring reflections on the broader and more open definition of commoning reminded me of work by feminist and ecofeminist thinkers like J.K. Gibson-Graham, especially their playful title *Waiting for the Revolution, or How to Smash Capitalism while Working at Home in Your Spare Time*. The core point they make is that there's already a great deal of activity in the world that doesn't follow capitalist logic. If we just recognize and value those practices, we can build on them. This alone can make a big difference.
The focus on commoning, especially as regards the relationships between humans and other forms of existence, opens up a whole set of complex and important questions. I want to point to one in particular: commoning with whom? This leads us into more difficult terrain of boundary-making. Who defines the commons? What are the boundaries of commons? Who is included, and who isn't? These are persistent and troubling questions. We talk about the commons as something open and inclusive, but the issue of hospitality – who is welcomed, who is considered a stranger, who is trusted or feared – is never far away. There is often a tension between wanting to preserve the integrity of a commons and the fear that newcomers might not respect its values.

SS: As Jonathan said, the question of boundaries is never easy. Rather than define what society is, which I find too abstract, I prefer to ask: What kind of society are we living in? What kind are we trying to build? And crucially, who is this 'we'?

I speak from the position that the society I live in is unjust and destructive – toward nature, toward the very conditions of humanity. I want to be part of those working to change that. In this, I see commoning as a possible path for transformation, because it carries the idea of sharing. It implies collective decision-making and a different way of organizing life. This renders commoning more than just an ethical appeal. It's a principle that can guide concrete practices: how experts who know participate in decisions on equal footing, how we share resources, how we govern ourselves, and how we relate to both urban and more-than-human environments.

That's why I'm critical of the idea, often repeated even among commons scholars, that commoning could make the state more helpful or humane. Historically, from ancient Sumer to the present, the state has functioned as a mechanism for the unequal distribution of power. Its logic hasn't changed, even if actors have. This doesn't mean the state can be ignored. Sometimes negotiation is possible, sometimes confrontation is necessary. But we should be clear: the state may tolerate or co-opt commoning, but it is not its guarantor, and certainly not its foundation.

JM: I'm somewhat agnostic about the role of the state. As Stavros pointed out, its track record isn't encouraging, but I don't see the state disappearing anytime soon, at least not in any positive sense. So perhaps we must consider how it might be repurposed. That said, I'm not especially hopeful. Just look at how international regulations, like those on industrial fishing, are not enforced. We have expensive naval fleets, but they're not used to stop deep sea pirate fishing. There's a clear line of continuity from ancient Sumer, through the enclosures of commons in England, to today's extractive systems. Still, the state isn't going away. Whether we like it or not, it remains part of the political terrain we must navigate.

What this question really made me reflect on is why the commons have become such a central rallying point for the left today. I think it's tied to a growing sense of fragility, entanglement, and the urgent need to rethink how we live. The commons signal a shift from a logic of efficiency to an ethics of sufficiency, from maximizing output to asking what is enough for everyone to live well. It's not necessarily a full commitment to degrowth, but it

implies a fundamental shift in values. And so, the critical question becomes, who is included in this 'everyone'. Who gets to benefit from the commons, and to flourish? That's where the ethical stakes of commoning truly lie.

Institutions

SR, TV, CB: We would further like to inquire into the relation between commons and institutions of society. How do commons relate to institutions (from family to state) and to the existing fabric of society? To what extent can institutions be considered commons? What distinguishes commons from institutions of society, and how might institutions transform through practices of commoning?

SS: We should not limit our idea of institutions to our experience of how they function in capitalist societies, where they often reproduce inequality and injustice. Institutions themselves are not inherently oppressive. There can be institutions of communing – forms that ensure shared access to knowledge, goods, health, education, even pleasure, particularly for those at risk of exclusion. Having this conversation is already a form of commoning: sharing ideas, exchanging perspectives, and practicing an ethics of dialogue. It's not about directing others how to think but about finding meaning together.

Historically, societies did not simply love or hate power. They developed mechanisms to discourage the accumulation of power, like mutual help in agriculture or the rotation of duties in healthcare and other areas crucial for well-being, where expert knowledge should not become an instrument of power accumulation. These arrangements are institutions of commoning: practices that create predictability based on shared values, rather than on law or hierarchy. They can be inclusive or exclusive. They can either prevent or encourage collective inventiveness.

We must also rethink existing institutions. Family, for instance, is not simply a molecule of capitalism. There are examples of societies where families were neither patriarchal nor hierarchical. Such a family was not necessarily based on the exploitation of the younger by the elder, but supported shared responsibility across generations. Markets, too, have existed based on reciprocity and respect, rather than competition and

extraction. Thus, building institutions of commoning means fostering collective inventiveness. Commoning is not about applying a fixed model; it reinvents itself through participation, negotiation, and struggle. There is no ready-made path, but a shared path we create as we move.

JM: This brings me back to how we conceptualize the commons. In textbook terms, a common-pool resource is defined as non-excludable but rivalrous, meaning that while it is difficult to prevent people from accessing it, one person's use still diminishes what is available for others. A family, however, is very excludable (membership is selective) and non-rivalrous (benefits are not diminished by being utilized). It is perhaps closer to a club good than to a commons. However, thinking about commoning today forces us to rethink both boundaries and depletability. Neither concept is as straightforward as it once appeared. With tangible commons, like fisheries or grazing fields, boundaries are relatively clear: you either enclose them or you don't. But with intangible commons, such as urban atmospheres or shared social creativity, boundaries become much harder to define. This also complicates the idea of depletion. With physical commons, overuse can exhaust resources. But with intangible commons, participation might enrich rather than diminish them. Interaction can be additive, not extractive.

SS: Whenever we discuss boundaries in commoning, we must also recognize the need for self-transformation. In today's often hostile societies, those involved in commoning cannot simply act on inherited values; they must develop new ethical frameworks, challenge themselves, and reshape their ways of acting together, because the value system related to commoning is necessarily not something that they have within them, their education, and their experiences. This process inevitably raises difficult questions: Who am I acting for? In whose name? What am I doing?
It's crucial to situate discussions of commoning in their historical and social contexts. Are we speaking about commoning in the abstract, or about specific conditions, like those in Naples today, where legal barriers, traditions like 'uso civico', and local histories shape what is possible? Commoning is not just an ethical aspiration; it is a situated, historical practice. Without attention to specific conditions of a context, we risk misunderstanding both its possibilities and its challenges.

JM: The relationship between value extraction, capitalism, and the institutions raises important questions about how we think about the commons today. In recent years, much of the discussion around the commons has shifted toward digital commons: platforms, the internet, and new forms of mediated sharing. But this terrain is complex. Take platform capitalism – Airbnb, for instance. From a certain perspective such a platform creates a kind of shared resource, a commons of sorts, which is then enclosed and monetized (extracted value from). While people seemingly can share, the fundamental problem is that these interactions are embedded within a logic of profit-making, not grounded in an ethics of the commons. Even if something resembling a shared resource emerges, it is produced through systems structured around extraction and accumulation. It is not commoning in any genuine sense. At the same time, it is important to recognize that capitalism does not merely extract value; it also organizes and produces surplus value, which it then captures. This complexity matters. Can tools developed within capitalist frameworks, such as digital platforms, be repurposed to create genuine commons? Or are they inevitably limited by the logics of capital?

SS: If existing systems offered no possibilities for change, there would be little point in discussing it. Every society contains potentialities for change and for collective emancipation – some have been realized, others not.

Some of the tools and structures we have today could indeed be used differently. But transforming them is not simply a matter of changing roles; it also requires rethinking their substance. The internet offers a powerful example of the enclosure of data. Early on, it created possibilities for decentralized participation and dispersed communication. Alternative, non-centralized models were imaginable. Yet over time, we witnessed the enclosure of data, particularly through platforms like Facebook and various cloud services. Information freely shared has been captured and appropriated to train corporate AI systems. It has been repurposed for profit.

This enclosure was not inevitable. It reflects how capitalist systems appropriate forms of cooperation and collective production. In Marxian terms, the 'general intellect' – the collective wisdom generated through shared digital practices – has been systematically captured and commodified.

Inclusion

SR, TV, CB: We would like to explore how practices of commoning can remain inclusive, avoiding the emergence of new forms of exclusion. If commons are conceptually tied to specific communities, how can they be understood in ways that foster coexistence rather than competition? How are boundaries and thresholds defined within commons, and how are they negotiated between conflict and peace?

JM: This goes to the heart of an issue of the inevitability of boundaries, even within practices guided by the ethics of commoning as a fruitful way of living together. No matter how open our intentions, questions of who belongs and who benefits will always arise. Rather than denying boundaries, we must recognize and critically engage with them. Boundaries may emerge unconsciously, but their effects are real. Sustaining commoning requires being alert to how boundaries form, who they include or exclude, how they are consciously or unconsciously enforced, and whether they are ethically justified. The work of commoning is not to eliminate boundaries, but to remain in ongoing, uncomfortable dialogue about how they are drawn, and how they can be challenged and changed over time.

SS: As Jonathan pointed out, the question of boundaries is never easy. It's tempting to imagine a universal humanity without divisions. Yet commoning must deal with boundaries in very specific and concrete ways. It moves toward inclusiveness, beyond the injustices and hierarchies of existing societies, but making this real requires navigating particular historical and political conditions. In Naples, for example, activist groups negotiated with an enlightened municipal administration to create commons open to everyone – excluding only racist, sexist, or fascist actors. Sometimes, temporary boundaries are necessary to protect fragile commoning practices under threat. These measures are defensive, not a valued choice. The boundaries should never become permanent. They must remain porous, flexible enough to defend a space without closing it off. If boundaries harden, commons risk becoming new enclosures, the very opposite of what commoning seeks to achieve.

Inclusiveness remains the most fundamental characteristic of commoning. It means openness to everyone (except those

seeking to destroy commons), embracing difference in all its forms and expressions. As John Holloway reminds us, even as we work toward change, we are not simply the enlightened ones; we are also 'crippled' by histories. We carry traces of old systems, with habits shaped by patriarchy, capitalism, and hierarchy. Education, for instance, still teaches us that it is better to be a lawyer than a mason. Boundaries, where they arise, must therefore always be approached with caution.
In this context, peace is a word easily claimed, even by those who prepare for war. Without justice and equality, talk of peace remains empty. Commoning fosters the conditions for peace through inclusion, care, and shared responsibility. Yet peace cannot be guaranteed by commoning alone. True peace depends on dismantling injustice and exploitation, the deeper roots of conflict.

JM: Stavros's reflections highlight an important point: invoking the commons inevitably raises questions of justice, or I would prefer to call it fairness. I've previously mentioned an ethics of sufficiency, but thinking about the commons opens the question of who has a legitimate claim, who has the right to benefit from what is shared. If we are not constantly attentive to the troubling question of inclusivity and fairness, commons risk becoming insular.
Many case studies show how groups have turned shared resources into forms of collective private property, enclosures that benefit only a few. When that happens, exclusion and conflict inevitably follow, undermining the very principles of commoning. It's important to keep these risks in mind. Even when we think of the classic example – a shared pasture – we should ask, what about those who arrive later, what about the temporary visitor, what about the refugee. Commoning must remain open to those who may not have prior claims, yet whose inclusion challenges us to rethink what sharing truly means.
This consideration brings into focus what I would call the legitimacy of the illegitimate. It is about a beneficiary who may not have contributed to the maintenance of the commons, but is in desperate need of nourishment. This becomes particularly important when thinking about urban commons. My colleague Kristina Grange, drawing on Derrida's work on hospitality, has written about the ethics of welcoming the stranger as

part of commoning practices. Hospitality toward the refugee, the outsider, the stranger, is vital. It prevents commons communities from degenerating into new forms of enclosure or tribalism. One of the key challenges for commoning is how to manage boundaries without replicating exclusionary practices. In liberal democratic traditions, citizenship is positively framed as promising inclusion regardless of belief or behaviour. From the point of view of the state, inclusion mostly depends on legal status – whether someone holds citizenship, refugee status, or another legal title. In commons, inclusion may be based on behaviour and shared ethical principles – rejecting, for instance, racism, sexism, or fascism. However, if commons begin to exclude based on how people think or express themselves, there is a risk of becoming restrictive or authoritarian. The challenge, then, is how to maintain openness while safeguarding the ethical foundations that make commoning possible.

SS: Commoning should not be understood as a process of homogenization (as perhaps communitarianism would think about it), where sharing an identity becomes a condition for belonging. On the contrary, commoning thrives on difference, on creating a shared ground among those who remain different, who want to preserve their difference, but are willing to collaborate. Commoning is a process that gestures towards difference it produces. If commoning loses this capacity to embrace difference, it risks closing in on itself and becoming exclusionary.

While there are parallels with the ideal of liberal citizenship, we must remember that historically, citizenship was often denied to women, children, and outsiders. Commoning must go further, actively cultivating inclusion across categories of difference. Hospitality offers a way to think about this more deeply. Drawing on the idea of the gift, commoning is not about exchange based on equality, but about offering. It is about sharing knowledge, resources, or space to create the conditions for mutual participation. It is not simply about helping those in need, but about offering something that enables others to become equal participants in the commons. For example, when we share our expertise, whether in economics, architecture, urban design, or other fields, we are not exchanging favours. We are giving in a way that creates a common ground, opening opportunities

for others to fully join and shape the collective process of commoning. It is through such gestures that commoning remains open, transformative, and true to its purpose.

Urban Space

SR, TV, CB: To situate the theme of commoning more firmly within urban space, we would like to introduce a post-human perspective. How can commons and commoners be understood through the lens of assemblages, drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari? What research methodologies would you recommend for studying or engaging with urban commons and commoners, while attending to both human and non-human dimensions of their production?

JM: How we conceptualize commons fundamentally shapes how we engage with them. Rather than seeing commons simply as resources to be managed or governance systems to be regulated, I prefer to think of them as ecologies of heterogeneous relations, as assemblages where value is produced by humans and non-humans who create mutual, non-destructive benefits. These relations are productive not through extraction, but through mutual enhancement.
From this perspective, urban commons are not just about human cooperation. They involve more-than-human entanglements, such as creative atmospheres, material ecosystems, and shared urban existences that sustain multiple forms of life. Thinking in this way opens up new potentialities for urban cohabitation. It challenges the traditional Western idea of the city as an exclusively human domain and invites us to imagine urban spaces designed for mutual flourishing across human and non-human participants alike. This perspective reorients both how we retrofit existing cities and how we design future urban environments to support inclusive commons that benefit more than just humans.

SS: There is much to be learned from the ways different cultures, especially those displaced into cities, develop forms of sharing and coexistence. They sustain different relationships with land, introducing hybrid practices that challenge the dominant Western idea of land as a resource to be used and distributed. In my research, I encountered traditions in Latin America where

land is understood not as property, but as a mother. This is not merely a metaphor or a religious belief, but a different way of living together. Instead of seeing themselves as owners or users, people become tenders of the land: taking only what they need and giving back what is necessary for regeneration. This stands in contrast even to the most progressive ideas of Western thought, where land is still primarily viewed as a resource to be carefully managed but ultimately extracted from.

An example from Colombia illustrates how different traditions shape relationships to land. During land redistribution debates, peasant farmers sought private parcels to secure their family livelihoods, with ownership based on a notion of fairer distribution. Descendants of formerly enslaved black people, drawing on traditions of collective life, demanded communal ownership, which was recognized by legal status as collective landholdings. Meanwhile, indigenous groups, rooted in the Mother Earth tradition, rejected the notion of ownership altogether, seeking simply the right to live with and tend the land, allowing it to continue existing as a subject in its own right. These differing approaches show how complex commoning becomes when it confronts systems of governance that do not recognize such diversity. There are no fixed principles to guide this process. Commoning emerges through negotiation and through building shared ground amid profound differences. There is no outside authority to impose it. There are no power relations based on treaties.

Ultimately, commoning calls for rethinking community, cooperation, and justice not as abstract ideals, but as practices continually shaped through acts of difference, coexistence, and care.

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