



## Open education: Common(s), commonism and the new common wealth

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### abstract

Open Education, and specifically the Open Education Resources movement, seeks to provide universal access to knowledge, undermining the historical enclosure and increasing privatisation of the public education system. An important aspect of this movement is a reinvigoration of the concept of ‘the commons’. The paper examines this aspiration by submitting the implicit theoretical assumptions of Open Education and the underlying notion of ‘the commons’ to the test of critical political economy. The paper acknowledges the radical possibility of the idea of ‘the commons’, but argues that its radical potentiality can be undermined by a preoccupation with ‘the freedom of things rather than with the freedom of labour’. The paper presents an interpretation of ‘the commons’ based on the concept of ‘living knowledge’ and ‘autonomous institutionality’ (Roggero, 2011), and offers the Social Science Centre in the UK, as an example of an ‘institution of the common’<sup>1</sup>. The paper concludes by arguing the most radical revision of the concept of ‘the common’ involves a fundamental reappraisal of what constitutes social or common wealth.

### Introduction

There are two distinct forms of Open Education: Open Education itself, and Open Educational Resources; these two terms are often used interchangeably, yet retain subtle differences.

Open Education refers to recent efforts by individuals and organisations across the world to use the Internet to share knowledge, ideas, teaching practices, infrastructure, tools and resources, inside and outside formal educational settings. Although the term Open Education has been used since the 1960s, the current dominant use of the term refers to co-ordinated efforts during the past decade to exploit the growing availability of personal computers and increasingly ubiquitous high-speed networks.

Examples of Open Education initiatives are varied and still emerging but include newly established organisations such as the P2P University; new learning theories, such as

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Connectivism; and new styles of participatory learning design, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). All aspects of Open Education place an emphasis on the availability of and advantages afforded by the Internet for the production and exchange of knowledge. For example, the P2P University refers to itself as a ‘grassroots open education project that organises learning outside of institutional walls... leveraging the internet and educational materials available online’ (P2PU.org).

P2PU emphasizes its accessibility, low cost and democratic style of bringing together those who wish to teach and those who wish to learn. Connectivism is ‘a learning theory for the digital age’ (Seimens, 2004), a cybernetic theory of personal networks, interdependent nodes and dynamic feedback. Its authors emphasise the inter-related connections made possible by digital networks and the cycle of information that flows from the individual to the network and into organizations. The ‘amplification of learning, knowledge and understanding through the extension of a personal network is the epitome of connectivism’ (Siemens, 2004). MOOCs apply Connectivist learning theory in the design of courses with hundreds or thousands of autonomous participants encouraged to participate through their Personal Learning Environments (PLEs), constructed out of blogs, wikis and other loosely coupled services and aggregated resources from the Internet. From each of these examples, Open Education can be understood as a positive response to the seemingly technologically determined nature of our lives, constructing new opportunities for access to learning, advancing greater democracy in learning design, asserting self-determination and supporting lifelong learning in the face of rapid changes in labour-force requirements.

Open Educational Resources (OER) refers to the worldwide community effort to create an educational commons based on the provision of actual ‘educational materials and resources offered freely and openly for anyone to use and under some licenses to re-mix, improve and redistribute’ (Wikipedia). Typically, those resources are made available under a Creative Commons license and include both learning resources and tools by which those resources are created, managed and disseminated.

In their simplest form, OERs are any teaching or learning resource on the Internet that is licensed for re-use. The largest institutional collection of OERs is published by MIT’s *OpenCourseWare* project, which has systematically licensed teaching and learning resources for over 2000 of MIT’s courses since 2001 (Winn, 2012). Similarly, recurrent programmes of funding in the UK have led to the creation and release of OERs across the higher education sector and are available from JORUM, the national repository for open teaching and learning materials.

In just ten years, a relatively small number of educators have created a discernible movement that has attracted millions of pounds from philanthropic and state funding. This movement, growing out of hundreds of universities, colleges, schools and other organisations, has produced tens of thousands of educational resources, often entire course materials that can be used by anyone with access to the Internet. Today, there are

international consortia, conferences, NGOs and government reports that promote the opening up of education, to which Open Education and OERs are central.

Open Education is a pragmatic response by educators and researchers to the growth of the Internet, using a widespread technology to undertake what its advocates see as both a public good and to exploit an opportunity to effect educational reform. The question remains open as to whether Open Education and OER constitute a revolution in teaching and learning, as their proponents claim:

We are on the cusp of a global revolution in teaching and learning. Educators worldwide are developing a vast pool of educational resources on the Internet, open and free for all to use. These educators are creating a world where each and every person on earth can access and contribute to the sum of all human knowledge. They are also planting the seeds of a new pedagogy where educators and learners create, shape and evolve knowledge together, deepening their skills and understanding as they go. (Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2007)

## Private property and Creative Commons

The question remains as the extent to which the values that underpin Open Education and OER constitute a real revolution in education. The answer to that question revolves around the concept of ‘the commons’ and the way it has been used to encode new forms of property under the concept of the Creative Commons (Lessig, 2001, 2004; Boyle, 2008; Benkler, 2006).

Open Education and OER rely heavily on the use of Creative Commons licenses, all of which are in one way or another derived from the General Public License (GPL) and Berkeley Software Distribution (BSD) licenses first created in 1989. Since the 1990s, software has been created and distributed using such licenses and it is widely acknowledged that the popular Creative Commons licenses are inspired by the use of open licenses in the world of software. Creative commons licensing provides a method for producers of Open Educational Resources to define more precisely the terms of use of their intellectual work.

The writing of Lessig, Benkler, Boyle and others provides persuasive and eloquent arguments about the importance of protecting and developing a creative and (re)productive commons in the face of attempts to consolidate the property relation in an increasingly digital culture. However, this tactic has been characterized as ‘information exceptionalism’ (Pederson, 2010) in that while there is a well-established history of legislation that conceives ‘property’ as both tangible and intangible, prominent writers in the recent Free Culture movement tactically avoid conflating these tangible and intangible realms:

Essentially, the Free Software and Free Culture movements reject the concept of property and instead choose to frame issues pertaining to ideas, information and knowledge - or the intangible realm - in

terms of freedom, liberty, human rights, policy, intervention, and regulation. Anything but property, but preferably 'policy'. (Pederson, 2010: 93)

As a result, an acknowledgement of the underpinning material basis for the production of the commons is avoided, treating information as the exception to the naturalised rule of property. However, this division of property into policy only serves to *protect* the private property relation by diverting public attention to the promise of freedoms in the intangible informational realm (Pederson, 2010: 102). Consequently, Open Education and OER, in their attempts to provide universal access to knowledge, do not undermine the increasing privatisation of the public education system.

## From the freedom of things to the freedom of labour

While Open Education attempts to liberate intellectual work from the constraints of intellectual property law, it does little to liberate the intellectual worker from the constraints of the academic labour process and the reality of private property. The reification of 'the commons' as a site of non-scarce, replicable and accessible educational resources is to mistake the freedom of things for the freedom of labour. Open Education Resources are the product of intellectual work and not simply the application of novel Creative Commons licenses. In that sense there is nothing new about the production of OERs, they are simply 'a stage in the metamorphosis of the labour process' (Söderberg, 2007: 71).

As universities rapidly replace their collegial frameworks with corporate structures, prioritising commercial partnerships and promoting themselves as engines of economic growth (Finlayson and Hayward, 2010; Levidow, 2002), the jobs and employment rights of teachers grows increasingly vulnerable and exploited through the use of fixed-term and casual employment contracts and the roll out of technologies which aim to automate and regulate the work of teachers in the name of efficiency and improving the student-customer experience. In this form, education is simply a market where indebted students enter into a contract around learning content and accreditation (Noble, 1998).

As the university increasingly adopts corporate forms, objectives and practices, so the role of the academic is to improve the brand and reputation of the university (Neocleous, 2003). As can be seen in the case of MIT, the public profile provided by open, online courses and open educational resources provides a further level of academic distinction to higher education institutions, and is at once both a contribution to the 'public good' and a method of extracting further value out of the academic labour process (Winn, 2012). To what extent the Open Education movement can oppose the corporate personification of institutions and the objectification of their staff and students is still open to question, although the overwhelming trend so far is for OER to be seen as sustainable only to the extent that it can attract private and state funding, which serves the reputation building and, therefore, value creation of the respective universities as institutions for the public good and notable for the quality of their intellectual output.

## **‘The commons’: a new radical common-sense**

The concept of ‘the commons’ has become ubiquitous as a generic term with which to conceptualise the notion of Open Education and OERs. At the same time the notion of ‘the commons’, has been subject to further critique and elaboration by Marxist scholars, so much so that the concept of ‘the commons’ has become the new radical commonsense, and a way of reinvigorating the concept of communism.

Commons has become: ‘common organisational structures, where the common is seen not as a natural resource but a social product, and this common is an exhaustible source of innovation and creativity’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 111-112), and ‘the incarnation, the production and the liberation of the multitude’ (2000: 303), as well as ‘the shared substance of our social being’ (Zizek, 2009). In another formulation ‘the commons’ has emerged as the verb ‘to common’, with ‘commoning’ as the basis for a new constitution, ‘the rules we use to decide how to share our common resources’ (Midnight Notes, 2009). In a more historical exposition ‘commoning’ is reclaimed as a way of establishing customary rights, the basic principles of which are: ‘anti-enclosure, neighbourhood, travel, subsistence and reparation’ (Linebaugh, 2008: 275) providing ‘the right of resistance to the reality of the planet of slums, gated communities, and terror without end’ (Linebaugh, 2008: 279), and the basis for ‘networks of resistance... against the capitalist state’ (De Angelis and Stavrides, 2011).

One of the more sustained renditions of a new commons is the notion of ‘commonism’ elaborated by Dyer-Witheford (2006, 2007), who, in a number of articles has sought to promote the concept of commonism as a way to avoid the bad history of authoritarian state communism, while, at the same time, providing an antidote to centralised planning and the restrictions of private property through new forms of collective ownership. An important aspect of the notion of commonism is the way in which it connects with issues of technological production in the context of Open Education and Open Educational Resources. Dyer-Witheford’s most significant work to date has been *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism* (1999). In this book he sets out the ways in which postmodern capitalism has extended beyond the factory to permeate all of social life, particularly through the digitalised circuits of cyber-space. He shows how these extended social sites and the circuits through which they are connected provide spaces of interconnected collected struggle and resistance.

*Cyber-Marx* is conceptualized within the framework of Autonomist Marxism. The basic framework of Autonomism is well known (Wright, 2002). Key aspects of this version of Marxism are, firstly, Marx’s mature social theory as elaborated in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* is a theory of capital’s precariousness, rather than the theory of domination espoused by orthodox Marxism. This precariousness is produced through the power of labour (the working class):

We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from

the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital's own reproduction must be tuned. (Tronti, 1964)

Secondly, this 'scandalous novelty of this new workerist ideology' (Wright, 2002: 63) demanded an even more shocking revelation. Not only was Capital not the centre of its own social universe, but the working class was now reconstituted to include not just workers at work in factories, but other groups that included students, the unemployed and the women's movement, previously not regarded as central to the reproduction of surplus value. Key to this formulation was the concept of the 'social factory':

At the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation becomes a moment of the relation of production, the whole of society becomes an articulation of production; in other words, the whole of society exists as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over the whole of society. (Tronti, 1971: 51-2, quoted in Wright, 2002: 37-38)

Thirdly, at the centre of the notion of class composition lies the concept of self-valorisation (*auto-valorizzazione*). The Autonomists had taken the most central idea of Marx's capital, the law of value, and turned it against itself: Capital as the self expansive Subject is now replaced by the capacity of the working class for self valorization in and against the Capital relation. Self-valorisation is defined as: 'the positive moments of working class autonomy - where the negative moments are made up of workers' resistance to capital domination'; and, 'a self-defining, self-determining process which goes beyond the mere resistance to capitalist valorisation to a positive project of self-constitution' (Cleaver, 1992: 129 quoted in Dinerstein, Bohn, and Spicer, 2008).

Finally, one of the very practical ways by which this self-valorisation and class recomposition might be achieved is through workers enquiry or co-research. Beginning as inquiry into actual conditions of work in Italian factories in the 1950s, workers alongside intellectuals used the methods of social science research to develop their own form of radical sociology as the basis for a revolutionary science, i.e., the production of knowledge as a political project: 'the joint production of social knowledge' (Wright, 2002: 23); and so come to know the basis of their own class recomposition. This is not knowledge for its own sake but 'the only way to understand the system is conceiving its destruction' (Asor Rosa in Quaderni Rosi quoted in Wright, 2002: 29).

All of this practical intellectual activity was possessed with a sense of immanence and urgency, giving immediacy to the slogan: 'communism is the real movement which abolishes the present state of things' (Marx, 1998). For these new revolutionary scientists communism is not a project for constructing a model of a future world; but, rather, 'a practical means for the destruction of the present society' (Tronti, 1965: 8).

## Commonism: as a cell-like form

Dyer-Witheford takes the spirit and the sensibility of Autonomist Marxism, not least its conceptual ingenuity, and attempts to recreate a framework of resistance through his concept of commonism. Just as *Autonomia* inverts the notion of valorisation as self-valorisation, Commonism takes as its starting point the organising principle on which the circuit of capitalist expansion is established, i.e. the commodity-form, and uses it as the basis of revolutionary struggle. As Dyer-Witheford reminds us, Marx opens *Capital* Vol. 1 with the statement:

The wealth of society in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, *appears* as an immense collection of commodities; the individual commodity *appears* as its elemental form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. (Marx, 1990. Authors' emphasis)

Commonism takes this statement as the organising principle for its own radical response to the social relations of capitalist society:

If the cell form of capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of a society beyond capital is the common. A commodity is a good produced for sale, a common is a good produced, or conserved, to be shared. The notion of a commodity, a good produced for sale, presupposes private owners between whom the exchange occurs. The notions of the common presupposes collectivities – associations and assemblies – within which sharing is organised. If capitalism presents itself as an immense heap of commodities, commonism is a multiplication of commons. (Dyer-Witheford, 2007)

The emphasis here is on the difference between the production of goods for sale, and the production of goods to be shared as a public good. In each case the emphasis is on forms of ownership and sharing. Dyer-Witheford (2007) argues that the moment of collision between the commodity and the commons is the moment of struggle against the logic of capitalism. He identifies three distinct areas where these struggles are concentrated: the ecology, the social, and the network:

Ecological disaster is the revenge of the markets so-called negative externalities'; social development is based on market operations, 'intensifying inequality, with immiseration amidst plentitude'; and networks are, 'the market's inability to accommodate its own positive externalities, that is, to allow the full benefits of innovations when they overflow market price mechanisms. (Dyer-Witheford, 2007)

Commonism points towards the kinds of progressive forms of social associations that these struggles have created. Commonism identifies these new forms of ownership as the *ecological commons* – 'conservation and regulation but also of public funding of new technologies and transportation systems'; the *social commons* – 'a global guaranteed livelihood entails a commons based on redistribution of wealth, while solidarity economics create experimental collectively-managed forms of production', and the *networked commons* – 'a commons of abundance, of non-rivalrous information goods', including free and open-source software as well as OERs (Dyer-Witheford, 2007).

In a moment of theoretical ingenuity, Dyer-Witheford argues that just as Capital operates through circuits of exchange, so too the commons circulate to create self-reinforcing

networks of alternative provision in a way that is both ‘aggressive and expansive: proliferating, self-strengthening and diversifying’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2007). It is this sense of linked and connected struggles that form the core of his notion of commonism. Taken together these three spheres will form a new social order: a ‘commons of singularities’; or, ‘the circulation of the common’, i.e., commonism’. Commonism will be carried forward through ‘a pluralistic planning process’ involving state and non-state organisations supported by a ‘commonist’ government, and in that way represent a global new ‘New Deal’ of major proportions (Dyer-Witheford, 2007).

In a previous elaboration, Dyer-Witheford connects commonism very directly with the concept of cognitive capitalism, generated by new high technologies, based on digitalisation and biotechnology, all of which have the capacity to be life-changing (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 23). Following Marx (1843), he defines this capacity for human transformation, as ‘Species Beings’.

Dyer-Witheford develops the essence of radical subjectivity implied in this notion of the commons through the concept of ‘species being’, which he adapts from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* 1844. Dyer-Witheford reminds us that Marx defined ‘species being’ as human life that is alienated from products of its own labour, from fellow beings, from the natural world and from their own ‘historical possibilities of self-development’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 17). ‘Species being’, after Marx, is ‘life activity itself as an object of will and consciousness’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 17). ‘Species being’ is ‘a constitutive power, a bootstrapped, self-reinforcing loop of social co-operation, technoscientific competencies and conscious awareness’ (2006:17). It is ‘the capacity of humans to affect change in their collective development’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 17). Dyer-Witheford makes the bold claim:

‘Species Being’ is the closest Marx came to positively identifying, transformative agency of communism. The creation of a ‘working class’ as a decomposition of species being inflicted by the ‘class-ifying’ gridding and divisive operations of capital as it alienates species being: class identity is that which has to be destroyed in struggle so that species being can emerge. (18)

Dyer-Witheford argues that the new regimes of biotechnology and digitalisation offer the potential for the socialisation of productive activity, new modes of product creation and circulation outside of ‘the orbit of the commodity form’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 25). This can happen, he argues, through the development of peer-to-peer and open source networks: as ‘creative commons’ and ‘open ‘cultures’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 25), as well as by access to affordable drugs, and the social control of pharmaceutical production and distribution. In this way commonism is contesting the regime of private property of the world market, ‘not as a natural state, but an equalitarian order to be achieved’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 27). Again, Dyer-Witheford argues this can be carried out by a regime of ‘social planning, and on a scale to make previous efforts look retiring’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 30). All of this, he claims, is made possible by the ‘new informational technologies created by cognitive capital [which] makes such governmentality feasible’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: 30), kept in check by the logic of the new planetary logic of the



commons: ‘the logic of collective creativity and welfare proposed by the counter-globalisation movements’ (Dyer-Witford, 2006: 16): the new commonism.

## Critique of Commonism and Autonomist Marxism

While commonism draws attention to progressive forms of collaborative labour, its focus is very much on the positive redistribution of goods and resources. The implication is that different forms of exchange produce different forms of social activity, ‘shared resources generate forms of shared co-operation – associations – that coordinate the conversion of further resources into expanded commons’ (Dyer-Witford, 2007). The focus is very much on exchange relations rather than searching for more substantive underlying levels of social determinations in the ways in which social relations are produced.

With its focus on exchange rather than production, commonism not only replays the consumerist limits of the Open Education and Open Educational Resources movement, but also, ironically, is in danger of replicating the forms of social regulation it is attempting to avoid: Socialism. If Socialism is ‘the collective ownership of the means of production and economic planning in an industrialised context’ (Postone, 1993: 7), then commonism looks very much like the latest form of socialist society. Notwithstanding the fact that commonism attempts to privilege one form of planning over another, radical and democratic rather than centralised and repressive, without a fundamental exposition of the processes through which capitalist society is (re)produced, these instructions look normative and contingent rather than determined by a progressive materially grounded social project (Postone, 1993: 11 & 15).

The limits of Dyer-Witford’s commonism are the limits of Autonomist Marxism. Autonomia does provide a powerful theorisation, the strength of which is its ability to connect and reconnect with movements of revolutionary resistance. However, its populist and enduring appeal is also a source of its theoretical weakness. By presenting the working class as the substance of radical subjectivity, Autonomia is presenting labour as a fetishised and transhistorical category, transgressing the key formulation of Marx’s mature social science. This point is well made by the Endnotes Collective:

Labour does not simply pre-exist its objectification in the capitalist commodity as a positive ground to be liberated in socialism or communism through the alteration of its formal expression. Rather, in a fundamental sense value – as the primary social mediation – pre-exists and thus has a priority over labour. (Endnotes Collective, 2010)

In this way, the overcoming of Capital cannot simply involve the emancipation of workers, or any other form of work that suggests a naturalised quality of human activity, e.g., ‘species being’; but, rather, the destruction of the commodity-form and the value relation on which it is based. The Endnotes Collective refer to this type of negative critique as ‘communisation’.

## The importance of 'improvement'

This formulation of labour as the historical and logical product of the development of capitalist social relations is made clear through an exposition of the development of the anti-commons movement of enclosure. Writers in the Marxist tradition have exposed the historical and logical development of capitalism as the destruction of common land and its associated customary rights as well as the process by which value is extracted from workers. This process of the ongoing production of surplus value is captured by the concept of improvement – an important issue that is often underplayed in the historical account of commons and enclosure<sup>2</sup>. It is, in fact, the process of improvement that provides the dynamic for technological developments and bio-science (Meiksins Wood, 2002).

Capitalism began as a process of enclosure and improvement; starting in England in the 16th century it spread throughout the world by colonialism, empire and globalisation (Meiksins Wood, 2002). This process of enclosure (i.e. 'primitive accumulation') by which peasants and indigenous peoples were forced from the land was characterised by violence and repression, signaling a complete transformation in the most basic human practices with each other and with nature (Meiksins Wood, 2002: 95; Bellamy Foster, 2000).

Enclosure and improvement are not simply about the restrictions and development of common land, but are more fundamentally concerned with the historic and social fabrication of human labour as waged work, forming the basis for capitalist relations of production. Under the terms of waged work direct producers are dispossessed of all property, other than their own labour-power, which they are compelled to sell to their employers. The rate at which labour-power is exploited by employers decides the amount of surplus value that is produced. The rate of surplus value is not in any sense related to the concrete nature of labour (i.e. use value) or the quantity of goods produced (i.e. empirical wealth), but is a social calculation based on the productivity of each worker (i.e. socially necessary labour) in relation to the productivity of labour in general (i.e. abstract labour), taken as a social average. It is the extent to which value in capitalism is calculated as the social measure of a real abstraction, rather than simply by the quantity of goods produced, that defines the character of capitalist value (i.e. non-empirical wealth). Under pressure of competition employers are forced to improve the objective conditions of production, including the capacity of labour-power, to realise their investment on the market by the exchange of goods and services (i. e. commodities). These objective conditions include the forms in which labour-power is reproduced, meaning that the relations of work extend to include the whole of society, until they constitute the nature of the social itself (i.e. real subsumption).

These improvements are highly contentious and are prone to produce ever more sophisticated forms of worker resistance as the capacity of labour-power is improved.

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2 For example, Linebaugh's compelling account of the Magna Carta in the history of commons has little to say on the issue of improvement.

These increasingly sophisticated forms of protest ensure that conflict, contradiction and crisis are an endemic aspect of the capitalist world. The alternatives proposed by dispossessed workers are based on the social ownership and control of the conditions of production, which the increasingly socialised process of production implies. It is this increasingly social process of production which creates the conditions for the idea of 'the commons' to re-emerge as a critical principle and political project.

The peculiarity of Capital is that these imperatives of production are impersonal and indirect, enforced through the abstract law of value which exists as the political power of the state and the economic power of money, each of which constitute, as complementary forms, the abstract power of the capital relation (Postone, 1993; Clarke, 1991a). This process of abstraction renders what is a social and historical process as if it were natural and timeless, requiring a critique of political economy to reveal its true nature.

Bearing this in mind, the state cannot exist as a functional solution to the catastrophe of Capitalism, e.g., a new 'New Deal', as however populist or democratic its planning structures might be the capitalist state is itself a form of crisis and catastrophe (Clarke, 1991a). Nor, by the same logic, can emancipation be found in the concept of 'Species Being', nor through the idea of alienated labour on which it is based. The power of Marx's work is found in the revelation of the power of abstraction of labour and the value-form through which Marx laid the foundations for his mature critique of political economy (Clarke, 1991b: 82).

A fully grounded social theory begins in the substantive forms within which social relations are derived and determined. For Marx those relations are determined by Capital, described as '...value in motion...' (Marx, 1990). Therefore, the starting point for any analysis of capital is value and not the commodity-form or 'species being' (Postone, 1993; Clarke, 1991b). While Commonism is right to draw our attention to the significance of the commodity-form as the organising principle for capitalism, Marx's mature social theory is careful to draw our attention to the fact that the wealth of capitalist societies only *appears* to be the vast accumulation of commodities. The real wealth of capitalist society is not material things produced by alienated labour, as in the early work, but immaterial value, the substance of which is abstract labour, which *appears* in the form of things (i.e. commodities). Therefore, any attempt to build a critique of Capital from the concept of the commodity-form or 'species being', rather than the immaterial reality of value out of which the thing like world of commodities are derived, is based on a fundamental misconception of Marx's critical social theory and the form of value in capital the substance of which is abstract labour (Clarke, 1991b).

A fully developed critique of capital does not start by replicating the cell-like commodity-form, nor by basing radical subjectivity within a transhistorical and suprasocial concept of 'species being'. The key point is that 'Marx's notion of the overcoming of capitalism... involves a transformation not only of the existing mode of distribution but also of the mode

of production’ (Postone, 1993 23). This means negating the logic of capitalist production: the law of value, through a process of ‘anti-value in motion’ (Dinerstein and Neary, 2002).

### **Anti-value in motion: A new ‘institution of the common’**

In the final chapter of *Cyber-Marx*, Dyer-Witheford provides what *appears* to be a compelling account of the ways in which academic labour can develop forms of resistance, including strikes, inviting activists onto campus, by allegiances with other protesting workers and social movements against ‘high technology austerity’ (Dyer-Witheford, 1999: 235). Along with these he suggests newly constituted curricula based on specific radical topics: the establishment of new indices of well-being beyond monetarised measures; the new capacities for democratic planning afforded by new technology; systems of income allocation outside of wage – labour; the development of peer to peer open source communications networks; research projects that seek to enrich critical political economy with ecological and feminist knowledge, and the formation of aesthetics and imaginaries adequate to the scope of what a progressive and sustainable humanity might become (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 90- 91). He suggests using the technologies against themselves through what he refers to as ‘movements of species being’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 89):

They will invoke some of the same intellectual and co-operative capacities cognitive capital tries to harness, but point them in different directions, and with a vastly expanded horizon of collective responsibility. They will establish networks of alternative research, new connections and alliances; they build a capacity for counter-planning from below. (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 89)

Dyer-Witheford is right to argue that ‘Universities will be key to this transformation’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 90), as a key institution in the move towards a post capitalist society of the commons. But in Dyer-Witheford’s commonist world of knowledge production, the organisational structure of the university is not challenged fundamentally, its institutional form remains intact.

Recently, a reinvigorated version of *Autonomia* has emerged, which utilises the concept of the commons in a higher educational context, but in a way that prioritises the nature of the University’s institutional form as: ‘the institutions of the common’, and an insurgent form of ‘living knowledge’ (Roggero, 2011). At the core of ‘living knowledge’ lies the form and character of the university ‘where conflicts within the production of knowledge are a central battlefield of class struggle through power relations, and productive relations’ (Roggero, 2011: 3).

At the centre of the process of production is co-research, challenging ‘the borders between research and politics, knowledge and conflicts, the university and the social context, work and militancy’ (Roggero, 2011: 5). The principle of ‘co-research’ involves students and academics working together as a form of political praxis, so that the production of knowledge becomes a key principle of self-organisation and radical subjectivity (Roggero, 2011). And in the middle of all of this the concept of ‘the common’ is re-established.

Living knowledge insists that ‘the commons’ must be denaturalised, and situated historically and logically ‘within the transformations of the social relations of labour and capital and not just in the current context’ (Roggero, 2011: 8); but, rather, as new ‘institutions of the common’ (Roggero, 2011: 9). This goes beyond commonist notions of organising courses, or inviting academics onto campus, or holding strikes or even forming allegiances with social movements; but is, rather, a project to create ‘*autonomous institutional*ity’ (Roggero, 2011: 129).

The Social Science Centre, in Lincoln, UK might be described as a new ‘institution of the common’ or ‘autonomous institutionality’. While the Social Science Centre has no formal connection with the architects of ‘living knowledge’, it shares many of their pragmatic and theoretical imperatives (Neary, 2012).

The Social Science Centre (SSC) is a not-for-profit, co-operative model of higher education, managed by its members: academics, students, administrators, educators, activists, on the basis of democratic, non-hierarchical, dynamic self-organisational principles. The Social Science Centre has emerged out of the crisis of higher education in the context of the crisis of capitalism. The Social Science Centre is rooted in the history of how those excluded from higher education have organised their own intellectual lives and learning in collaboration with university academics. Historical examples in the UK include Working Mens’ Clubs and University Settlements, Free Libraries, Extension Classes, Ruskin College and the Workers Educational Association (Rose, 2001; Thody, 2012).

The SSC is grounded in forms of organisation that have arisen out of the development of the Social Centre network in the UK and around the world. Social Centres have emerged as sites for the development of autonomous politics and resistance to the growing corporate takeover, enclosure and alienation of everyday life. Social Centres convert local unused buildings into self-organised sites for the provision of radical community use: social services, music, art and publishing. A key characteristic that the SSC takes from all these forms of provision is the concept of localness. The Centre will make use of the most up to date educational technologies, but this is not an online or web-based provision. It is important that the Centre is in a real space at the heart of its local community.

There is a very clear link between workers enquiry and co-research applied to the current moment through new concepts of autonomous education, revealed as the construction of ‘living knowledge’ (Roggero, 2011). The SSC is inspired by and connected with movements of resistance against the corporatisation of higher education in Europe and around the world. These movements include the Edu-Factory Collective for whom the crisis of higher education is part of a wider global social and political crisis. This group of academics and students argue that in a global capitalist economy, increasingly dominated by knowledge manufacture and exchange: cognitive capitalism, the University has become an important site of struggle over the way in which knowledge is produced.

The co-operative practices on which the management of the SSC is based extend to the ways in which courses are taught. All classes will be participative and collaborative, so as

to include the experience and knowledge of the student as an intrinsic part of the teaching and learning programmes. Students will have the chance to design courses as well as deliver some of the teaching themselves with support from other members of the project. Students will be able to work with academics on research projects as well as publish their own writings. A core principle of the Centre is that teachers and students and the supporting members have much to learn from each other.

Students will not leave the Centre with a university degree, but they will have a learning experience that is equivalent to the level of a degree; each student will receive a certificate in higher education, with an extensive written transcript detailing their academic and intellectual achievements. The time taken to gain an award is subject to negotiation between student and teachers. The subjects taught at the Centre will be based on the Social Sciences, broadly defined, in ways that involve the knowledge and experience of the teachers and students. The SSC acknowledges that the co-operative model does not provide an immediate, real alternative to the capitalist labour process, but provides a space within which lessons learned from the struggle to create a dissenting form of higher education can be further developed.

While the Centre is located in Lincoln, it does not have any formal links with the University of Lincoln or with any other University. It is hoped and expected that this model of small scale, self-funded higher education provision will be adapted for different subject areas and in different locations nationally and internationally. These multi-various Centres will provide a supportive and co-operative network to further advance this radical model for higher and higher education in the UK and around the world.

## **Conclusion: a new common wealth**

Open Education and OER are progressive attempts to provide educational materials that are openly accessible and re-usable. While these forms of provision stretch the limits of the laws of intellectual property, they do not undermine the laws of private property, but further liberalise the conditions through which knowledge can be exchanged. While these new educational resources provide for closer engagement between student and academic they do not undermine the ways in which capitalist work is organised by concentrating on the freedom of things over the freedom of people.

Despite the dynamism generated by the digitalisation of social life and the apparently endless possibilities provided by this ‘technological utopia’, the logic of the so called virtual revolution does not escape the conditions where ‘the dull compulsion of economic life completes the subjection of the labourer to the capitalist’ (Marx, 1990).

Any attempt to escape these conditions demands recasting the meaning and purpose of work so that it is based on an emancipatory notion of what constitutes wealth in a newly substantiated post-capitalist world. This new form of common wealth is materialised through an understanding that capitalism has made an exponential improvement in the

productive power and knowledge of humanity, but that these powers and knowledge have been used to oppress its own productive populations (Postone, 1993). Any revolutionary project must be based on the need re-appropriate this knowledge and power for the populations that have produced it; not simply to make available new knowledge in less restricted 'open' forms as OERs, nor to reify new forms of property relations through commonism; but, rather, to produce a new common sense: raising critique to the level of society so that society can recognise its real nature and recompose itself in a more sustainable and resilient form.

The question for a *really* open education is not the extent to which educational resources can be made freely available, within the current constraints of capitalist property law; but, rather, what should constitute the nature of wealth in a post capitalist society. That is the really open question.

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