SEVEN ETHICS AGAINST CAPITALISM

OLI MOULD

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‘*Seven Ethics Against Capitalism* sharply reveals the multiple crises being generated by the capitalist mode of production – from climate breakdown, to inequality, to the erosion of democracy – and how impossible it would be to fix any of these problems without a radical transformation in the way we organize society. Mould convincingly argues that values such as solidarity, stewardship and radical love must be at the heart of this new vision for the world, as well as the movements aiming to bring it into being.’

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Seven Ethics Against Capitalism

Towards a Planetary Commons

Oli Mould

polity

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Introduction

Capitalism isn’t working. Over the course of the twentieth century it colonized almost every nation of the globe. Yet, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it has hastily ushered in the emergence of growing climate catastrophe on a planetary scale. There is little point in trying to tweak the way capitalism works to be more ecologically sustainable, because its underlying and foundational principle of privatizing the means of production entails the extraction of natural resources to an ever-deepening scale in the all-consuming pursuit of ‘growth’. Capitalism cannot be fixed. The half a millennium or so of rampant imperialist mercantilism, which mutated into a nefarious neoliberal global capitalism and now has morphed into a dangerously fascistic form of nationalistic wealth generation, has proved beyond any reasonable doubt that capitalism does irrevocable damage to the planet, to the climate, to biodiversity and to us as a species.

What is more, all the benefits that supposedly flow from capitalism – creativity, liberty, morality, enlightenment, equality, democracy, wealth and the progress of civilization – are now drying up, and in some cases reversing completely. And more recently, this has been exacerbated. Because the coronavirus pandemic that swept the globe in 2020 rocked capitalism to its very foundations; and it has shown just how much we depend on each other, not capital, for survival. The response to the spread of the virus and the need to keep people ‘locked down’ saw the revival of state-level quasi-socialism on a level barely seen in a generation. There were some of the largest financial bailouts by governments the world has ever seen, to industries and workers. Once bastions of capitalist society such as the US

and the UK rapidly implemented policies that were the mainstay of socialist demands, such as rather thinly veiled versions of universal basic income, student debt cancellation, free public services and, of course, the pedestalling of socialized healthcare. The nuances of these are still being implemented, and while a vaccine has been found and the virus will be managed, its impact upon the future of national institutions and indeed society more broadly will be felt far into the future. Because of the impact of the coronavirus, and the now increasing need for governments to act in similar ways to combat the inevitably far bigger crisis of global climate catastrophe, the weaknesses, inefficiencies, inequalities and injustices of capitalism have been vividly exposed.

Yet despite this, the advocates of a capitalist way of life continue to preach that the only way to achieve progress and a better and greener world is to blindly continue along the same path of destruction we have travelled on for so many years. But they are wrong. To tackle the global problems of the future starting with the present climate catastrophe, capitalism needs to be replaced with something else entirely.

But how can this be done? What should replace it? History is littered with revolutionary events, when the oppressed rise up and overthrow their capitalist masters and attempt to install a fairer form of society. But from small-scale, local changes to generation-long episodes of state-led communism, they have all – to a greater or lesser degree – fallen foul of the lure of capitalist dogma that decrees ‘there is no alternative’. This is because in attempting to ‘scale up’ anti-capitalist societies, these revolutionary events have – in one way or another – started to (and in some cases, completely) mirror the injustices of capitalism by invoking the same kind of power imbalances, authoritarianism and inequality, just with a different

political economic hue. Their anti-capitalist fundamentals have been lost.

But there is one societal ideology that has remained constant throughout these episodes. From human prehistory, throughout capitalism's growth, and all those failed revolutions, the very real ideology of the *commons* has remained. Now, it is an idea whose time has come. But in order for it to aid in the reconstitution of our planet and the healing it requires, we need a *planetary* commons. This is the coming together of *all* peoples and resources in the world into a *planetary* (not global, or international) mode of socio-economic organization that recognizes our material, cultural and psychological intimacy with the planet we inhabit and the human, nonhuman and intangible resources it offers. Planetary thinking embraces the differences of and in the world, and as feminist scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, it resists the image of the 'globe' or globalization as a false totality.[1] Practically, then, the planetary commons is a mode of organizing communities, nations and societies that foregrounds the very characteristics that capitalism defenestrates. Solidarity, stewardship, protecting the vulnerable, slowness, and even love; these are some of the ethical ways of being that capitalism diminishes, yet are vital if a planetary commons is to come into view.

Sometimes hidden, the traditional view of the commons has historically – either physically or ideologically – always been a means to subvert, resist and critique the prevailing order of social organization (be that feudalism, fundamentalism, a dictatorship or, today, capitalism). The commons has provided people and communities throughout history with a mode of existence within the cracks of hegemonic societal systems that we are living under. Today, within the cracks of capitalism, a common world is flourishing.[2] The commons, as an ideology of human

community, has existed in, through and outside of the prevailing order of society for millennia. It has provided societal organizations that are, on the whole, not only ecologically sustainable, but more equitable and just. The commons doesn't need the creation and exchange of capital to thrive; it only requires the willingness of those who believe in it to succeed.

However, caution is clearly required because the predatory growth of capitalism in the twenty-first century feeds off those forms of life that exist 'outside' of it. Appropriating anti-capitalist motifs,[3] accumulating by dispossessing,[4] and violently enclosing land, societies and ideologies that are not conforming to the mantra of profit-maximization, capitalism thrives off those people, places and experiences that critique it. And via its leading edge of marketing, public relations, advertising and the vernacular of 'creativity', capital is created out of the eventual privatization of that which was once held in common. Land, nature, housing, knowledge and even creativity itself have all been wrenched out of common ownership and been carved up and profited from by frontier capitalists. And that which is still common (e.g. the internet, the air we breathe and, now, outer space) is being targeted for privatization and subsequent commercialization.

Therefore to grow the commons to a point at which it is a viable social alternative requires protecting it from enclosure by contemporary forms of capitalism. It requires an active *anti*-capitalism that is also simultaneously a form of growing the commons, something that political geographers Gibson-Graham call common*ing*.[5] Commoning as a practice by *some* creates more commons as a resource for us *all* to benefit from. Despite the voracity of capitalism's enclosure, there are examples of communities building a commons that is not only resisting this process, but also expanding the more sustainable, just and equitable

social organization it creates *back* into the capitalist world for everyone to share. For example, there are inner-city squats that have resisted enclosure for decades and are now beginning to inform how cities are being built beyond the pure pursuit of profit; community gardening groups that have influenced urban agricultural practice to be more ecologically sustainable; refugee activist groups that have made spaces for people otherwise trafficked and brutally oppressed; climate justice movements that transformed city centres into enclaves of play, theatre and protest and are now shaping national and international policy on climate change; factory workers who have forcibly taken over the management structure to make it more equitable for all workers; and, in the wake of the coronavirus, mutual aid networks that have sprung up all over the world to help deliver food to the isolated, care for the sick, and educate and entertain locked-down children.

These are already-existing (and spreading) examples of the anti-capitalist commons that show how alternative ways of organizing our economies and societies are possible beyond the injustices of capitalism. They point tantalizingly towards a future beyond the environmental and societal injustices that we currently endure. They showcase the kinds of practices, behaviours and mindsets that have not only resisted capitalism, but built fairer worlds. But only a radical emancipation and diffusion of those already-existing commoning practices into a powerful collectivized force can see it viably resist capitalism. Before we can even begin to think about what structures, institutions, policies, governments and cities we need to build, there needs to be a radical change in the *ethical* position of our societies to reflect the emancipatory potential of the planetary commons. Wrestling back, maintaining and then spreading the commons away from a predatory capitalism requires ever more physical, virtual and emotional resources from

those people invested in the commons' survival (which, if we are to avoid the omnicide that a capitalist realism is marching us towards, will need to be everyone). In short, these resources need to be harnessed, to create an ethical commitment to realizing a *planetary* commons before it is too late.

This book therefore proposes a set of seven ethics that are gleaned from the already-existing commons. Individually, they can be seen as characteristics of the commons that are in direct opposition to the deleteriousness of capitalism. They are ethics *against* capitalism. But together, they can act as a mode of understanding the broader movement of commoning, and how it has the potential to resist and undo the deleterious effects of the current prevailing world order. What they are not is a static blueprint for action, a hegemonic view of a new planetary order that will only replace one form of ideological colonialism of the world with another. Indeed, scholars have argued that many of history's most barbaric colonial acts, not least the destruction of indigenous Americans by European 'pioneers', are tied up with the imposition of 'common land' for the settlers.[6] Instead, commoning is a way of being-in-the-world that disrupts the smooth functioning of the capitalist status quo and its planetary violence on all peoples. So together, these seven ethics are a call to rethink and re-engage with the planet in more just, equitable and ecologically sustainable ways that will safeguard our future-in-common. I will outline in detail what I mean by ethics, but first, what do I mean when I say the commons? And how can they be planetary?

The commons

There is no shortage of definitions and articulations of what is fundamentally a very elusive concept. The term

‘common’ refers perhaps to banality or the mundane, maybe a shared interest between friends, or even a derogatory slur upon a particular class of people. As easily dismissed as these can be as part of the quotidian vernacular, there is an underlying sense even with these uses that we can experience a shared existence that transcends a superficial individuality. Beyond that, though, ‘the commons’ becomes a slippery concept. But such elusiveness is a symptom of its vitality in human existence; knowing what the commons is and crucially *how* to enliven it is as deep a human trait as can be thought of. We are social creatures, we all descend from the same primordial soup, and we live in and share the *common*wealth that this planet affords us.

Fundamentally, the commons is that which we build by being together. More than a natural resource – a forest, a lake, a field – the commons is the community that builds up around and beyond it, the society it creates and the continual act of democratizing access and sharing the gifts of that resource to those who need it most. Building on the work of anthropologist Stephen Gudeman and geographers J. K. Gibson-Graham, the commons can be thought of less as a unitary or singular protected ‘natural’ resource (such as a rainforest, a pasture or an irrigation system, which are traditionally thought of as ‘common’ resources in institutional narratives) and more as a dialogical creation between a resource and the community it brings into existence. In other words, to realize its emancipatory potential from capitalism’s enclosure, the ontology of the commons requires a deeper understanding of its ‘lived’ component – something that comes from an interaction between the place and the community that relates to it. This conceptualization of the commons therefore differentiates it from those seen in more institutional and global forms, namely the Bretton Woods institutions such

as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank (but also including national-level interests such as foreign aid departments). These tend to see the commons as a static piece of land or natural resource that falls outside the jurisdiction of national governments or private interests; something to be guarded, with access limited to a deserving few.

Gudeman and Gibson-Graham argue against this. For them the commons is not a physical resource that abides by some regulatory framework that is imposed from above. They argue against this 'top-down' institutional view of the commons. They do acknowledge the importance of safeguarding the material wealth of the commons, but without theorizing the resources as being *of* the community, the commons will continue to be threatened with capitalist enclosure. This is because the commons will still be beholden to the same global political-economic logics that dictate the global institutions and national governments, that is, market interests ultimately trumping those of the indigenous communities. It's just for the supra-national institutions these logics have agreed to collaborate via regulation to administer the scarcity of the resource. It is of course laudable to protect a resource from overuse (and indeed has helped protect rainforests around the world from deforestation, oceans from overfishing and pastures from overgrazing) but it is not a functional mode of *diffusing* the commons throughout society so as to resist and replace capitalism, because it is ultimately beholden to market logics, however steeped in social responsibility they may be at the time. Indeed, the institutions that govern them will often restrict local indigenous communities from accessing the common resource, designating it instead as a protected area and assuming a stewardship role, dividing up the resource as *the institutions* see fit, rather than

collaborating with local knowledge; it is a form of colonial commons.

This is not a concept of the commons that we need today. Instead, any commons does not exist until a resource is overlaid with a community of people (and things) that freely access it. Gudeman argues that 'taking away the commons destroys community, and destroying a complex of relationships demolishes a commons'.[7] Seeing the commons in this way redefines both the commons *and* community. As the feminist scholar and researcher of the commons Silvia Federici argues:

> 'Community' has to be intended not as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from others, as with communities formed on the basis of religion or ethnicity, but rather as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.[8]

An example of this conceptualization of the commons often cited is the Van Panchayats in India, an indigenous community-based forest management system that came about through protests in the 1920s against what the community saw as the mismanagement of the forests by British Imperial rule. The community broke away from the state-led 'Joint Forest Management' system, which they saw as ineffective in stopping deforestation and the decline in local biodiversity. For a century, and at much lower cost than this national scheme, the local communities have continued to live in and off the forest as an integral part of their daily activities, all the while maintaining biodiversity levels and managing de- and reforestation themselves.[9]

Another example that extends this idea into the socio-political realm is that of Cherán in Mexico, a town that was ravaged by illegal loggers and with a corrupt local

government that turned a blind eye. The locals ran them both out of town and have never let them back in. That was in 2011, and today, the town does not take part in local or presidential elections, has its own community-led security force – *ronda* – and governs via a group randomly selected every three years.

There are many other examples that will be alluded to throughout this book that point towards how the commons is more than a specific natural resource. It is important to note, however, that this conceptualization of the commons is not entirely new. If we delve into the etymological history, there are glimpses of this kind of planetary commons evident throughout its long and complicated epistemological construction. It has spiritual, material, political, economic and cultural underpinnings that, if teased out, can help us to affirm the kind of commons that a planetary reading of it entails. So a brief and potted history of the commons is worth outlining.

A history of the commons

As mentioned previously, the commons is a nebulous concept, and so pinning down a history is a perilous task. History itself is a hegemonic project of enclosure, with those events, theories, ideologies and philosophies that were recorded given credence over those that were not. As such, analysing a history of the commons with the material available will inevitably err, because it relies on that which is written down (and accessible to me as an English-speaking, lowly academic researcher). So it is vital to recognize from the outset that various articulations of the commons – from a spiritual, philosophical and natural standpoint – have existed as long as humans have. From theories of property laws in Mesopotamia,[10] the ancient Egyptians' belief in the unifying force of Ma'at, the Andean

goddess Pachamama, Confucianism and Taoism in ancient China and the Druids in ancient Britain, to animism among indigenous peoples, there are ancient and non-Western narratives of the physical and spiritual commons that still exist, and thrive, today. However, to grasp how the commons has developed into an ideology that exists alongside, but with the potential to resist, contemporary forms of capitalism, it is pertinent to start a history of the commons, for this researcher at any rate, at the genesis of that capitalism, namely in ancient Greece.

Heraclitus (who died c. 475 BCE) was an Athenian philosopher, and insisted that we as humans, in order to become civilized and progress as a species, must 'follow the common' – the common of the *logos*. The logos, for Heraclitus, was a philosophical concept. It was not pure order, logic or reason (as is sometimes inferred from the etymological lineage); he used it far more esoterically to denote the cosmic 'existence' beyond our understanding. In some of his quotes it is 'the mind of God' but in others not a *super*natural force at all; instead it is the 'language of nature'. The logos was for Heraclitus a common experience for everyone. In his quoted sayings, he insisted on the metaphor that for those who are awake, there is only one world in common, but those who sleep withdraw into a private, self-interested world. We must therefore not act and speak as though we are asleep, but adhere to the common logos, forgoing private lives.

Moreover, the logos is unifying because it incorporates paradoxes and opposites, such as the 'ways upwards and downwards are one and the same', and 'the beginning and the end are common'. Moreover, Heraclitus' most famous quote is 'you can never step into the same river twice'. In saying this, he was indicating that everything flows from and in the common; there is no stasis or fixity, as everything is constantly in flux; but it is the same river that

flows; it is the same logos that flows. For Heraclitus, then, there is unity in the world – as each opposite cannot exist without the other – but it is a unity that flows, is never static and always changes. ‘Following the common’ for Heraclitus was the way to enlightenment, peace and self-control. Being ‘asleep’ and deviating from the common logos was to be ignorant of the truth.

Fast forward two millennia or so and the indigenous populations of the Americas are being systematically enclosed, marginalized and murdered by settler colonialists from Europe. The genocide of the Native Americans by various European monarchs in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is entangled with the realization of ‘the commons’, albeit as a precursor to private property rights. The ‘native’ indigenous person was seen by the Enlightenment scholars of the time as the Noble Savage ‘at one’ with nature, outside of modernity and as such part of the commonwealth of the land.[11] The mutual respect shown by the native Americans and the ontological equivalence with themselves that they afforded to the land and the animals were very much part of their ancient indigenous spirituality; but very much at odds with the European mindset of seeing the world as a resource ripe for primitive accumulation. As such, the natives became simply another natural resource for the Europeans to commandeer and carve up among their fellow settlers, or indeed to ship back to Europe as slaves.

But even within Europe itself, the commons was present, though under attack from enclosure. The Diggers were a group of radical Protestants who (in the wake of the First English Civil War) believed that humans are implicitly connected with nature, and the ownership of land by individuals was unjust, immoral and illiberal. Their main protagonist, Gerrard Winstanley, wrote in 1652, ‘true freedom lies where a man [*sic*] receives his nourishment

and preservation, and that is in the use of the earth'.[12] The Diggers set up communes across England, the most prominent being at St Georges Hill in Surrey (now, ironically, one of the most expensive privatized and gated communities in the entire world). Although their communes were eventually dismantled, they went on to form other groups, notably the Levellers, who carried forward the idea of the 'common' as an alternative to private land ownership. They championed a 'commonwealth', a land that could produce an abundance of resources free from what they saw as the tyrannical rule of the monarchy; a common *wealth* for everyone. They were, of course, battling against a growing belief in self-interest as the driving force of liberty, one that reaped massive rewards for the aristocratic and mercantile elite. And so the Levellers were quashed before they could mobilize political and resistive momentum (we will return to the Diggers in Ethic 2).

Their ideological, Heraclitian stance on the commons, though, remained, and can be exemplified in many struggles across the world in the subsequent centuries. The most notable from a political perspective was in the Paris Commune in 1871, when thousands of workers, servants, refugees and middle-class Parisians blockaded themselves in the city in response to the violence of the French government. The influence of the Paris Commune on future radical political movements cannot be overstated, but what is important here is their commitment to commonality, to the rejection of individualism and the violent nationalism it entailed. Indeed, one of the main protagonists of the Commune, Elisée Reclus, argued that 'Everywhere the word "commune" was understood in the largest sense, as referring to a new humanity, made up of free equal companions, oblivious to the existence of old boundaries,

helping each other in peace from one end of the world to the other.'[13]

The Communards' notion of the commons led to them creating a makeshift society that lasted for only seventy-two days, but one that focused on shared living and a distinct rejection of self-interest. The bloody end of the Commune at the hands of the French army represents the lengths to which the hegemony of systems of empire, colonialism and the state will go to assert its own version of progress. But the Commune also showed that in just seventy-two days, an actually existing commons was created that still influences political movements and scholarly debate today (we will revisit the importance of the Paris Commune in Ethic 5). [14]

More recently, the concept of the commons has been used to articulate an international common resource, most notably by the economist Elinor Ostrom, who published *Governing the Commons* in 1990.[15] She articulated the already-existing ways in which indigenous communities were effectively and efficiently managing commonly shared resources such as water, forests and grazing land. She was responding to the so-called 'tragedy of the commons', put forward by Garrett Hardin in 1968, who argued that the common use of a resource would lead to its ultimate depletion because of the inherent self-interest of certain individuals.[16] For Hardin, private ownership was the only way to secure the future of that resource. But Ostrom's research saw that many people were rejecting this idea, and she put forward a set of principles that, if adhered to, can sustain a common resource and not lead to its ultimate depletion. She won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, and many of her ideas are now implemented by the World Bank and their like to govern precious natural resources such as the Amazon rainforest. However, such

institutionalization of Ostrom's principles has led to privatization by another route. Silvia Federici has argued that the World Bank (and other supra-national Bretton Woods institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization) have commandeered important natural resources and merely put them under the control of states (which have been largely hollowed out by corporate interests). And under the guise of 'protecting biodiversity', access is limited to certain privileged companies, dignitaries, tourists and investors, all while indigenous communities continue to be expelled.

Global material resources are one thing, common global cultures and ideologies are another. There is very little or no cost of reproduction to a commonly consumed radio broadcast, film, creative idea or other cultural product; once it is made, it can be consumed without cost again and again by more and more people, potentially ad infinitum (unlike food or energy). Political theorists Hardt and Negri argue that the commons, enacted by an internationalist 'multitude' of people resistive to globalized capitalism, can also be 'the languages we create, the social practices we establish, [and] the modes of sociality that define our relationships'.[17] Yet even this more Heraclitian view of the commons is being enclosed by contemporary techniques of capitalist accumulation. Intellectual property rights (and the aggressive legal defence thereof), the hyper-individualization of everyday life by personal technologies and social media, and the quantification of everything (so as to be more amenable to markets) are just some of the processes that are enclosing 'common' shared global socio-cultural experiences. Cultural artistic forms such as music, film and TV that have been collectively experienced and enjoyed are now being deliberately produced to appeal to algorithmically created playlists, accessible on personalized media rather than speaking to social issues more broadly.