
Introduction: Diminishing Returns? Feminist Engagements with the Return to “the Commons”

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Garrett Hardin’s now infamous essay ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (1968) stands as a Hobbesian analogy for what he claims are the inherent destructive capacities of human beings that perpetually stand in the way of realizing a free community of individuals with shared resources. Hardin’s essay suggests that, when faced with the responsibility of sharing the commons, individual human self-interest - or fear of it - will win out over practices of collectivity, sharing, and mutual aid.

More recently, there has been a resurgence in political theory and political philosophy addressing the concept of “the commons”. Some of the most popularly cited references to the idea can be found in the work of Slavoj Žižek (2009) and Hardt and Negri (2009). This work has further been expounded upon in international conferences devoted to ‘The Idea of Communism’ in London (2009) and Berlin (2010), as well as the publication of an edited collection with the same title (Žižek and Douzinas 2010). Steeped in the philosophy of Spinoza, Hardt and Negri use a notion of the common that ‘...does not position humanity separate from nature, as either its exploiter or its custodian, but focuses rather on the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world, promoting the beneficial and limiting the detrimental forms of the common’ (2009: 8). For Žižek, the commons is comprised of culture (‘primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also shared infrastructure such as public transport, electricity, post, etc...’), external nature (‘from oil to forests and the natural habitat itself’), and internal nature (‘the biogenetic inheritance of humanity’), and are all increasingly enclosed by the forces of global capital (2009: 53). It is the process of our exclusion from these commons (‘our symbolic substance’) that Žižek argues should effectively proletarianize us into fighting for something more than capitalist liberal democracy - a system whose laissez-faire violence is justified through the empty gesture of ‘universal inclusion’ without any material bite (2009: 55). Žižek’s answer to this political conundrum is a call for communism.

And yet, the past century has seen vast and varied critical feminist engagements with historically changing concepts of communism and “the commons”. Struggles for universal suffrage, critiques of universality, denunciations of the hollowing out of the welfare state as a result of neoliberalisation (see Brenner et al. 2012; Hugill et al. 2011), and challenges to the concept of the human, are all examples of a rich and diverse feminist tradition of engagement with the concept of “the commons”. Given the popular return to the idea of the commons, what more does feminist analysis have

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to give to this conversation? Does the concept still have potential for future feminist projects? If so, what is this potential and what do these projects look like? How do they resonate - or not - with those of the past? Further, what role - if any - does the "the state" play in these imaginings?

On 23 March 2011, the Kent Centre for Law, Gender, and Sexuality (KCLGS) and Kent Law School hosted a workshop with Donatella Alessandrini, Brenna Bhandar, Rosemary Coombe, Radhika Desai, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Nina Power to explore these questions. Originally scheduled to take place in a reserved seminar room, in a last minute decision the workshop was moved to the Eliot College Dining Hall as a gesture of solidarity with students who had occupied it a day earlier. This occupation came just three months after Kent students carried out a four-week occupation of the Senate Building that lasted over Christmas and New Year. Both protests were part of a UK-wide student movement intent on drawing attention to the increasing student fees and heavy-handed austerity measures being implemented by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, measures that are still the subject of widespread public protest almost an entire year later.

The dining hall is located in a busy area of the university with a high amount of student foot traffic and is a regular spot for student meetings and group activities. As such, the location change made for some difficulty in hearing and delivering papers at the workshop. As a result we were in constant negotiation with other users of the space about how best to accommodate everyone's needs while still expressing allegiance to the political thrust of the occupation. Some of these negotiations went poorly and some were more successful. Most importantly, however, although we experienced frustrating levels of noise and disruption throughout the day, we were also able to experience the rewards of negotiating the stickiness of "solidarity" and "the commons". In fact, it was the difficulty of these amorphous terms that inspired the idea of the workshop in the first place. And so, how fitting it was that in response to what some of us have experienced as overly smoothed conceptions of "the commons", "communism" and "revolution" in other conversations, our workshop engaged with both theoretical and practical difficulties of the terms.

Moreover, amidst our theoretical conversations about "the public", "the commons", and subversive property regimes, disputes over legal entitlements to university space were negotiated in both physical and ideological terms in our very presence. Nearing the end of the day university staff and security arrived on site to inform the occupiers that they had to leave the space. Of course, this experience confirmed what we already knew - the local, national, and global relevance of these conversations is intimately bound up with pressing political issues that cannot be evaded through soundproof university classrooms.

The papers that follow mark the beginning of conversations attempting to bring this milieu of activism, feminism, anti-colonial and anti-racist approaches to bear on the

return to “the commons”. As such, they begin to help explicate some of these pressing political issues in a time when such work is much needed.

References

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