

The four realms of the commons

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This text is an initial effort to characterize and visualize the plural and elusive world of the commons.

As I have become more submerged in the subject matter, I have been moving away from the strong tie generally established in the bibliography between “commons” and “property,” so as to recognize the many ties with the notion of community. However you look at it, it is impossible to avoid the obvious: the commons sustain and are sustained by human communities. So we exit the world of economics, and get into the world of anthropology, which is also equivalent to making the transition from an ethic of values to an ethic of capacities, for a common good is no more than a successful strategy for building capacities for a human community. It will surprise no one, therefore, that I speak of shared goods whose circulation is regulated by the economy of the gift.² I also wish to highlight the historical nature of common goods, which suggests that the commons are not an objective fact, but rather the fruit of a political decision necessarily tied to the surrounding technologies.

If one considers the pollination of plants as a common good, the question arises as to whether it could be otherwise. And indeed it could be otherwise. In fact, no one thinks about the orbit of the planet Earth until someone has the technology to modify it, and then it will have to be declared a common good. And what about sensation? We refer to the capacity to experience enjoyment when observing a painting or a landscape. Or pain in the face of the disease or disgrace of others. If we believe pollination is a natural phenomenon comparable, say, to the laws of universal gravity, or that the electrobiochemical principles that regulate the myriad neuronal interactions are autonomous and not reprogrammable, we may be very mistaken.

New technologies can alter, directly or indirectly, the system by which bees are guided, or the operation of the human brain, to the extreme that we reach the point of considering that a good that we thought could not be depleted or appropriated is endangered, as is happening with the air, mathematics, the streets, or folklore. There is, in effect, a profound relationship between the new technologies and the new patrimonies, for every day new possibilities appear for fencing in or abusing a good that we only begin to value once it begins to be threatened. If a company can cast the garbage it produces into the seas or the atmosphere and save itself the costs of non-polluting production, or if someone discovers how to modify the genes of a species and patent new life forms, then humanity as a whole has the right to feel threatened and to claim the status of commons for the air we breathe and the genome that biochemistry, time, and chance have

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² BENKLER, Yochai: *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press. 2006.
http://www.benkler.org/wealth_of_networks/index.php/Download_PDFs_of_the_book

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bequeathed us.

Communities are then communities of persons affected who mobilize so as not to renounce the capacities that enabled its members to fully exercise their status as citizens or even as living beings. If the ethics of values helps us understand the movements that are leading to the formation of a third sector of the economy, the ethics of capacities allows us to understand which policies and actions to undertake.³

The formation of this third sector as a kind of coalition of empowered communities of affected persons clashes directly with the difficulty bringing together and visualizing common goods. It is an extremely diverse object, both if we think of the different scales on which it can emerge (neighborhood, local, national, regional, or global), and if we stop to consider the plurality of ways of managing it, actors involved, legal regimes affected, or technologies needed to sustain it. Admitting that such diversity should not be seen as a problem, but, to the contrary, as a characteristic feature of the cornucopia of common goods, we don't want to renounce the attempt to offer an image that depicts them as a colorful tapestry of remnants, a mosaic that depicts and sustains abundance and diversity.

To construct the tapestry we have drawn on the notion of realm proposed some years ago by Javier Echeverría⁴ to fit the human into the world of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), understood as a technical system which, in addition to assembling a constellation of technologies, constitutes a social system to which we have to learn to adapt. And certainly this so-called third realm, an emerging property of the system of ICTs, has come to have such a decisive presence in our lives as to merit anthropological treatment comparable to that which has been given to two other great human adaptations in history: that which has enabled the human being to develop in relation to territory (the environment), and that bound human beings more closely to other persons (the city).

The fourth realm is the one that we would like to suggest as essential for understanding how that which is human has unfolded over time: the body, which cannot be reduced to the laws of nature or morality, and always resistant to the many efforts to turn it into a theological, legal, medical, statistical, or, generically, biopolitical abstraction. The body is not only a unique machinery capable of processing huge quantities of information, digesting food, capturing external light or sound, not to mention all the forms of extracting, modifying, storing, transporting, and exuding data and structures. It is neither nature nor culture, but another realm to which one must refer and in which to contrast what happens (to us). Clearly, it is the sensor that alerts to the existence of contaminating substances or other threats to its integrity, without being a machine that responds in all humans homogeneously or unanimously, even when we are talking about bodies extended or mediated by technology.⁵ Its specificity is a scandal, a strategic place open to contingencies, resistant to formalization of any type, and always threatened by the many norms, prohibitions, and discourses that attempt to contain its impossible-to-encompass reality, which they seek to disembody.⁶

³ See also: NUSSBAUM, Martha: *Las fronteras de la justicia. Consideraciones sobre la exclusión*. Barcelona. Paidós. 2007. See also: SEN, Amartya: *Bienestar, justicia y mercado*. Barcelona. Paidós. 1998.

⁴ ECHEVERRÍA, Javier: *Los señores del aire y el Tercer Entorno*. Barcelona: Destino. 1999.

⁵ IHDE, Don: *Los cuerpos en la tecnología*. Barcelona, UOC. 2004.

⁶ VAL, Jaime del: "Cuerpos frontera. Imperios y resistencias en el pos-postmodernismo." In: *Organicidades* (UOC), Artnodes, No. 6. 2006. <http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/6/dt/esp/val.pdf>

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If life has unfolded in the four realms mentioned, it will also be necessary to defend, in each one, a set of common goods that guarantees their sustenance within certain minimal margins of dignity and liberty. With a desire to be concrete, and recognizing the different levels of complexity that structure the commons in each realm, we have put together a colorful conceptual tapestry which in its simplest version has the following aspects:

body	environment	city	digital
sensitivity corporality	biosphere geosphere	domestic cultural urban	code structures

Of the four realms, the environment is the most obvious. Yet the fact that it is easy to admit our extreme dependence on the environment does not mean that agreements for managing it are reached with greater celerity. The major polemics that we continue to be engaged in as to the impact of radioactive waste or growing emissions of greenhouse gases describe a long road that lies ahead. When we speak of climate, jungles, outer space, or photosynthesis we perceive the profound dependence of these commons on the new technologies. It is difficult not to see science and technology as the most powerful mechanisms for the fragmentation, modularization, and commodification of nature. Indeed, many goods that were considered inexhaustible have begun to be threatened and to be subtractable, that is, depletable, and, as Elinor Ostrom explained, it is also extremely costly to restrict free access or use from free-riders.⁷

With the chart in view, one can see the machine-like structure of human life, i.e. the automatism we depend on for things to work. Yet there is something that cannot be captured in a flow chart and that has to do with the interactions among people, distinct from those that take place between human and non-human actors.⁸ This informal aspect of relationships, proliferative and quotidian, of low intensity and high density, and which is essential for things to work, should be valued and considered as a common good constructed by us all which, accordingly, does not belong to those at the top or to any committee of representatives. Of course it does not operate as an instance of power (which can always be captured and integrated into the chart), but as part of that which is common, of the common capacity.⁹

These considerations have been framed after having made the decision to produce an image capable of containing the essential elements of the debate on common goods as a whole. And, of course, the chart we present aspires to show in one glance the extraordinary complexity of the matter. Creating an image is not an operation without risk, and implies at least two delicate

⁷ OSTROM, Elinor: *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press. 1990.

⁸ DELGADO, Manuel: *Sociedades movedizas. Pasos hacia una antropología de las calles*. Barcelona. Anagrama. 2007.

⁹ RANCIÈRE, Jacques: *El odio a la democracia*. Buenos Aires. Amorrortu. 2007.s

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decisions: first, assuming that the commons can be made visible as an external and abstract entity, apart from the communities and conflicts in which it is enveloped; second, expanding the profoundly technological nature of the commons. Sharing an image of something requires a chain of mobilizations that include processes of fragmentation, modulation, simulation, and inscription in one or several media, from books to the Internet, including academic networks or those associated with public opinion. And yes, we do it to give new legitimacy to the claims concerning the commons, without concealing the extreme complexity of the actors involved. Not in vain, getting to know something has always been an operation that has much to do with enlightening, unveiling, discovering, and, clearly, showing. In the scopic regime, characteristic of knowledge in modernity, only that which is visible can be credible.