

Doing away with 'labour': working and caring in a world of commons

Report of the labour discussion stream

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
A double transformation.....	3
Labour and life, reproduction and production: the role of the commons.....	4
Beyond a convergence of caring and the commons.....	5
The transition beyond waged labour.....	6
From labour as private property to labour as a common pool resource.....	6
Seed forms and their relation to a paradigm shift.....	8
A basic income?.....	8
Peer-to-peer production and labour power as a commons	9
An unresolved problem.....	9
A contested transition	10
The tragedy of the anti-commons.....	12

Introduction

This report on the very rich but diverse contributions to this stream will be organised around the main conference theme: 'from seed form to core paradigm'. Applying this idea to labour, the vision is of a paradigm shift from an economy in which our capacity to work, to labour or, in other words, to produce is managed as a commodity, priced, bought and sold on the 'labour market', to one in which this human capacity is managed as a commons, the responsibility of society, for the benefit of society. (Of course this raises big questions of the organisation of 'society' and, as always, the management of labour as a commons)

Conventionally, the concept of 'labour' is understood as referring to waged labour – the capacity to labour as exercised through a market. It was precisely this narrow understanding of labour that the discussions in this stream challenged from several angles. They opened with a presentation by Daniella Gottschlich that drew on the work of feminists who have highlighted the unwaged and hence mostly invisible labour of reproduction carried out largely through the family based household and its gendered division of labour. This takes place outside the labour market, yet the market depends on this non-monetarised labour, which in its relations of mutuality and sharing has some similarities to the commons. This family-based process of reproduction is founded, however, on a systemic subordination of women and hence contradicts the egalitarian principles of the commons.

A double transformation

A core paradigm of labour as a commons, therefore, involves a double transformation, on the one hand away from the commodification of labour and on the other hand overcoming the gendered division of labour in its reproduction. The move towards this paradigm is hence a very radical one, including for the many trade unionists whose organisations are based almost exclusively on the struggle over the price of labour and the operation of the labour market.

It is radical too because it involves a vision that reverses the relation between work and life that has underpinned conventional economics for centuries – ever since the existence of money and markets in effect. Conventionally, for those desiring social justice, the question has been how to organise the economy so that we are all working for a good life/society/the common good/to meet social and material needs. The paradigm shift implied by this stream moves beyond this traditional objective of the left towards an economy in which the organisation and character of labour is such that exercising or expressing our capacity to labour or to create is itself part of the good life.

So, instead of exercising our productive capacities for a good life for all, we would exercise or express this capacity as the good life. As Birgitte Kratzwald (http://p2pfoundation.net/Birgitte_Kratzwald) put it: "The first purpose of every

kind of economy, production, work, however we call it, should be to produce, reproduce, strengthen and enhance life and aliveness, to improve our living conditions, to create the conditions for a good life, a decent life for all. And all the activities that serve this purpose are not separated from our life – they are our lives.”

This runs counter to the instrumental logics of modernist, industrialist thinking that underpins not only capitalism but also many forms of socialism. These logics have been challenged in various recent and contemporary social movements, especially the women’s liberation movement, which in its practice has insisted on a logic of prefiguration: acting in the present in accord with the values of the society you are trying to create. This principle of prefiguration is mainly thought of in terms of guiding ways of organising for social change, but Birgitte’s point implies that it needs to be built into the relations and dynamics of the society that we seeking to build, including the alternative or autonomous forms of production we create now.

This change in the relation between life and labour is a key component of the paradigm shift entailed in a commons economy. It underpins a recurrent theme of commons thinking: to overcome the separation of production and reproduction, and, related to this, production from consumption. How could this be made possible? What can we learn from what is taking place in our economies already? What are the seed forms on which we must build?

Labour and life, reproduction and production: the role of the commons

In her introductory presentation, Daniella approached this question in a way that directly draws on feminist theory and especially feminist understandings of domestic care as a hidden, taken-for-granted precondition of the labour sold on the market – the de facto ‘externalisation’ of the labour involved in the reproduction of our capacities to create, both from generation to generation and from day to day.

In terms of the framing of the conference, ‘from seed form to core paradigm’, she explored how far caring can be seen as a seed form of commoning. She began this exploration by noting that caring and commoning have a lot in common.

Both are concerned to meet people’s livelihood needs rather than to “serve the markets” or to increase GDP. Both are based on cooperation and responsibility. Both concepts are relational – they must be constantly created and recreated. Both are based on ethics – for example, of (direct and indirect) reciprocity (this point was reinforced and expanded on by Stefan Meretz <http://keinform.de/2013/reciprocity-and-stigmergy/>) and nurture – that point to a variety of alternatives out of the social and ecological crises. Both can only persist if we constantly renew our efforts. And both are productive of value in ways and forms that the present capitalist market economy renders invisible, and which GDP metrics have only recently been used in, still limited,



attempts at measurement.

Where such attempts have been made, the results are striking. For example, timesheet-based household surveys on reproductive work have been conducted in a number of countries. Germany found that if the time spent in reproductive labour was counted on a minimum-wage basis it could add 60% to overall GDP. Argentina conducted a similar assessment. Such exercises help to show the “worth” of this type of work but also can lead to misconceptions about policy responses related to integrating this work into the market and therefore giving it a price.

Daniella also noted important differences between caring and commoning and insisted on their importance for our discussion. For example, while commons-based peer-to-peer production involves collaboration between equals, caring involves fragile and dependent people, notably at the beginning and towards the end of their lives. The relationship can still be reciprocal, as Daniella and Allen Butcher (http://p2pfoundation.net/Allen_Butcher), in his contribution to breakout sessions, illustrated with examples of inter-generational, intentional communities. These are practising a time-based economy in which all labour is valued equally, independently of where these hours have been spent, in employment-based income generation of the traditional labour market or in the community itself.

Another key difference is that it is possible to withdraw from a commons peer-to-peer collaboration in a way that is not possible in a caring relationship. These differences help to explain why the way to realise labour as a commons is not simply about uniting caring and commoning.

Beyond a convergence of caring and the commons

Another reason to look beyond this convergence of commoning with caring and reproduction is that the goal of labour as a commons cannot leave untransformed the labour market and waged labour. Here, if we understand the goal as organising labour as the good life, not only for the good life, the problem is not simply about obtaining decent jobs, decent wages and shorter working hours. All these are of central importance but the paradigm shift to labour as a commons is also a matter of obtaining the conditions – in terms of the organisation of labour – for the full realisation of the creativity of all for the benefit of all, in the very process of labour. For this and many other reasons, the solution does not lie simply in a reconciliation of the two spheres of caring and the commons.

Daniella and other contributors (Friederike Habermann http://p2pfoundation.net/Friederike_Habermann, Soma K Partasarhaty and Brigitte Kratzwald) were strongly opposed to monetising the care economy or leaving the sphere of reproduction and care to the state and hence to principles of hierarchy and command. In that sense the principles of the commons, as distinct from either the market or of hierarchy, must be the preferred option.

But they went further than this to ask how it might be possible to apply the values often to be found in the sphere of care and essential to the ideal of the commons to the realities of how labour is organised as a commodity in the labour market. “What we need,” Daniella argued, “is a system that enables social reproduction without social and ecological destruction ... [and this] will only be possible by switching perspectives, by using the principles of care economics and commons economics to transform the current market-driven economic system as a whole. Because it is this kind of work that contributes to valuing and maintaining social and ecological qualities beyond money and markets.”

The transition beyond waged labour

To help with the clarity and organisation of this report, it is useful to pause at this point before moving on to a new plane of the discussion, concerning the transformation of the sphere of waged labour and ‘production’. The discussion around Daniella’s introduction established the importance of rethinking the relation between life and work (and the need for a language that expresses the possibility and desirability of this new relation beyond its market value-based separation – in effect the recognition of the “whole”, the consideration of care or reproduction as an inherent part of the capacity to work or to create). It also established the value of the reproductive labour that from the perspective of the labour market and paid work is simultaneously invisible and indispensable. The second part of the report will cover the ways the discussion moved on to address the paradigm shift beyond the labour market itself.

Having rejected the marketisation/monetarisation of unpaid labours of reproduction as a solution to its undervalued, gender-divided character, it was necessary to consider on what basis, beyond a price mechanism, labour could be organised that acknowledged its value to society and treated its nurturance and management as a societal responsibility. The first step here was to uncover, and dig up, the foundations of the idea of a market for labour, the putting of a price on the capacity to produce, as if it was a commodity. The key foundation stone is the idea of this capacity as private property, which individuals therefore “take to the market” and sell.

From labour as private property to labour as a common pool resource

A useful spade to dig up this foundation stone came from Tom Walker ([Labour Power as a Common Pool Resource](#)). His critique of Locke’s foundational theory of labour as personal property points both to its logical flaws and to the essentially social relations on which labour is generally perceived as private property.

As far as the logical flaws are concerned, Tom argued, Locke’s narrative justifying labour as private property uses the concept of possession in a way that mixes the idea of the ownership of a thing with the idea of the thing

owned. “Thinking backward from possession to creation,” Tom said, “introduces the misleading analogy of the making of the thing and the thing made. What we end up with then is a notion that labour is a thing (substantive, enduring) that can be owned, rather than an action (expressive, fleeting) that is performed.”

Nevertheless, whatever the logical flaws behind a 17th-century theorist’s justification of it, this perception of labour as personal property persists to this day – and indeed leads to the idea of labour as a commons appearing somehow unnatural. To counter this misconception, Tom Walker draws on the work of the 18th-century radical thinker Thomas Hodgskin (who was also an influence on Marx) to show that the capacity to create, as exercised in the labour market and paid for with a wage, depends on a massive amount of unpaid labour.

In particular, Hodgskin pointed to the labour involved in bringing up children. “By far the most important [of operations that take more than a year to complete] is the rearing of youth and teaching them skilled labour, or some wealth-creating art,” he argued. He went on to point out that “this most important operation is performed ... without any circulating capital whatever.” By circulating capital, Hodgskin was referring to the notion of a stock of subsistence goods that the classical political economists of the early 19th century called the “wages-fund”. In short, the upbringing of the next generation of skilled workers was unpaid work, logically prior to wage labour and without which there would be no one to perform it.

Hilary Wainwright built on Hodgskin’s emphasis on the social labour underpinning the capacity to create that at present appears as private. In her pre-conference online contribution ([From Labour as Commodity to Labour as a Common](#)), she made the argument for labour as a commons explicit by taking shared characteristics of the diverse phenomena that are widely considered to be commons and asking how far these characteristics apply to labour.

These include: being considered essential for life, understood not merely in the biological sense; connecting individuals to one another, as tangible or intangible elements that we all have in common, and which make us members of a society rather than isolated entities in competition with each other; resources that we maintain or reproduce together, according to rules established by the community; a space or resource to be rescued from the decision-making of the post-democratic élite to be self-governed through forms of participative democracy.

All these apply to labour, understood as capacity to produce. It is a capacity that is shared by all humanity – indeed it is an important part of what makes us human; a capacity that is a powerful social force, a necessary condition of the life of many other commons; and which, though in one sense it is individual-centred, is also and necessarily socially shaped. The capacity to create is in good part dependent on the nature of education, culture and distribution of wealth; moreover, it can be nurtured and developed or suppressed, undeveloped and wasted. It is socially realised (whether or not this distributed potential is achieved depends on the nature of the social relations of production, communication and distribution) and socially benefited from (who

in society benefits from the creativity of others again depends on the economic, political and social relations).

On this basis, Hilary suggested, with Tom Walker, that labour can be understood as a common pool resource analogous to natural resources, enabling successful management regimes in one area to serve as a model for the other (both ways). “This has many socially and environmentally beneficial consequences,” Tom stressed. “It promotes the integration of ecological sustainability and social justice issues in place of the current dichotomy of jobs vs. the environment. There are no routinely-ignored ‘externalities’ in this model.”

“Secondly,” he continued, “treating labour as a common pool resource lays the foundation for a fundamentally different collective bargaining framework based on comprehensive social and environmental accounting rather than a treadmill of individualised wage and income maximisation.” It also lays the basis for time-based economies, as Allen Butcher argued, drawing on diverse actual experiences.

This (re)opens the question of value and its measurement, reinforcing the many critiques and practical challenges – from feminism, environmental economics, peer-to-peer digital production and free software collaboration, for example – to current monetary-based metrics.

Seed forms and their relation to a paradigm shift

A final dimension of the discussion concerned more in-depth consideration of strategies that would help bring about the shift from seed form to core paradigm. In the final session several seed forms concerning labour as a commons jostled for attention and generalisation.

Allen Butcher and others analysed the issues of sharing and valuing labour – especially the labour that nobody wanted to do – faced by intentional communities organised mostly but not exclusively around reproduction and based on the principles of a time-based economy. They explored how these intentional communities could be a base for influencing the market-based economy. Allen’s approach to the paradigm shift could be summed up as the “examples to follow” plus the detailed anatomy of the practical workings and problems faced by the time-based economies of the intentional communities with which the School of Intentioneering (<http://www.intentioneers.net/>) works and whose experiences and innovations the school spreads.

A basic income?

Time and, in particular, the conditions for everyone to be “time-wealthy” was the focus of a contribution by Friederike Habermann on the importance of, and possible problems with, the proposal for a basic income. She was equivocal. On the one hand, she stressed the way that a basic income for all liberated people



from the time pressures of labour in an economy dominated by money and hierarchy. It would, she recognised, following other advocates of the idea, provide large numbers of people with autonomy from the labour market, freeing their time for commons-based alternatives.

On the other hand, she warned that because work in the sphere of reproduction is unpaid and undervalued, and generally carried out by women as part of family relationships, often in a context of subordination, then an unconditional basic income could increase the split between those doing such work and those who would have to bring in so much money that other people could be paid for doing work that would be looked on even more strongly than before as “non-productive”. “Instead of all the work being finally accepted as part of the whole,” Friederike said, “an unconditional basic income would probably lead to the contrary: that the recognition of non-reproductive or non-caring work would even increase, and the reputation of care work would decrease.”

Soma K Parthasarathy (http://p2pfoundation.net/Soma_Parthasarathy) from India described households in contexts of high levels of material and resource poverty dependent on the commons and therefore with embedded ways of managing natural commons for their subsistence. She too highlighted the problem of the gendered division of labour, not only in the reproductive economy but also in the care of the natural commons. She also described the way in which the Indian state reinforced these inequalities.

Her contribution was effectively a warning against any over-optimism about the social relations of communities organising their natural resources as subsistence commons. While such governance systems have institutionalised needs-based access regimes among community members, without education and a culture of women’s autonomy these communities cannot break from reinforced long-inherited patriarchal relations between men and women.

Peer-to-peer production and labour power as a commons

As part of the labour stream, Michel Bauwens presented his vision of commons-based peer-to-peer production, originating in the free software movement and based not on non-proprietary but rather commons-based intellectual property rights ([Michel Bauwens https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANbZqvNU_jc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANbZqvNU_jc)). His approach implies moving from this sphere of seed forms towards a paradigm shift that implies a wide range of alliances with all those who are challenging, in practice if not explicitly, labour organised as a commodity – for example, the co-operative movement, innovative labour organisations, a partner state etc.

In explaining his vision, however, he did not explicitly consider the problem of reproduction and the subordination of women. This perhaps points to an unresolved problem in this stream and for the wider discussion, as already indicated in the contribution by Daniella Gottschlich.

An unresolved problem

The discussion of the persistence of the gendered division of labour and, linked to it, the subordination of women pointed to an important and unresolved problem. This is that it is not only waged labour that depends on and reinforces a sphere of unpaid caring work that continues outside of the public economy – whether or not the public economy is private, state or commons-based. It is also a recurring feature of seed forms of commons production. And this unpaid, undervalued, often invisible labour in turn depends primarily – but not exclusively – on the subordination of women.

Again, this is a taken-for-granted foundation not only of both the private capitalist market and state economies but also it seems of peer-production economies. Or at least the latter forms do not appear, in the process of their creation of a new paradigm of production, to have found a solution or even a seed form of a solution to the gendered division of labour in reproduction.

In this report, bearing mind our historical context, we could put the problem as follows. The issue of reproduction of the capacity to work, both generationally and day to day, is central to any critical discussion of the organisation of labour, looked at holistically and in relation to its life-provisioning and social purposes. The sphere of reproduction as it is presently organised in most parts of the world depends centrally on the subordination of women and their invisible and undervalued domestic labour through familial, personal relationships. The feminist or women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s was central in making these unpaid, unrecognised, value-producing forms of labour visible and politically sensitive and in opening, through experimental practice, a search for alternative relations of reproduction. Significantly, this movement was a product of the same processes of mass education that created the conditions for the pervasive character of the immaterial or knowledge-based labour that favoured the birth of the free software movement and commons-based peer-to-peer production, mainly involved in cultural production.

In theory, then, the historical conditions are ripe for a new paradigm for the organisation of labour and for the relations through which it is reproduced and sustained. They clearly concern the question of the recognition of division and inequality within society that is the product of factors that cannot be overcome simply by commoning but also require further forms of self-conscious and self-reflexive human-centred organisation beyond our current predominantly money and market-centred system and the gendered division of labour on which it depends. The discussion in the labour stream addressed this problem mainly by trying to learn from intentional communities and the way they share domestic labour on a non-gendered basis – valuing, even to the point of celebrating, work that nobody wants to do (cleaning toilets for example). But clearly there are broader society-wide issues of economic security, gendered socialisation and egocentric, male-centric cultures that need to be addressed.

A contested transition

It may help to put this problem (which, since it concerns half of humanity, goes to the heart of the problem of how to nurture, develop and manage the capacity to produce as a common pool resource) in the context of the ongoing contested transition from Fordism.

The origins of this transition can be found in the movements of the late 1960s and 1970s (whose importance for seed forms of a new paradigm for the organisation of labour we have just considered) as well as in the financialisation that began in the same period, providing capital with an apparent way out of its crisis. But both the importance of our work and the historical nature of the problems we face become clearer if we recognise that the paradigm shift that is underway is a contested one.

This recognition reinforces an awareness of ambivalence running through the conference. The point is that vanguard of capitalist business also recognises the exhaustion of the Fordist paradigm, and like a predatory magpie looks out for the shine of innovative forms with commercial potential. This ambivalence is not so much a cause for anxiety. Rather it is grounds for a sense of opportunity and for recognising the importance of looking beyond particular seed forms to the wider economic and political conditions for realising its potential in the development of the commons and breaking from the imperatives of capital accumulation.

Further possible lines of work: applying Elinor Ostrom's eight principles of commons design to labour

With this context of a conflictive period of change in mind, this report will end by briefly suggesting some further lines of thought and possible work.

First, a further resource for moving in practice towards a core paradigm based on the commons would be to improve our institutional thinking on how to realise the vision of labour as a commons. Here it would make sense to explore what would be involved in applying the eight principles that Elinor Ostrom identified through her extensive empirical work on many experiences of traditional commons as "the design principles of robust, long enduring, common-pool resource institutions".

(<http://onthecommons.org/magazine/elinor-ostroms-8-principles-managing-commons>)

Bearing in mind her insistence that there is no one solution to all commons dilemmas, to prepare for such an exploration we need to answer the question: what is distinctive about labour as a common pool resource?

The labour stream discussions established how the capacity to produce is a shared resource, socially produced, reproduced and socially used. One distinctive feature is that it has a dual character, perhaps as a result of being a human capacity: it is both personally (including bodily) exercised and also crucially dependent on collaboration for its full realisation. This dual character points to the complex nature of this resource, which an application of Elinor

Ostrom's design principles will need to take into account.

A related aspect of this complexity is that the capacity to produce is potentially both rivalrous and non-rivalrous. It is a common pool resource that can be both exhausted by overuse and developed through its exercise, depending on how it is managed, including self-managed. This is where the question of the reproduction of this capacity has to be an essential part of any institutional design.

The tragedy of the anti-commons

A further step in this process could be aided by noting the various tragedies of the anti-commons with regard to the capacity to produce. In other words, in order to get a measure of the change that is required and the challenges that the design principles have to meet, it is worth briefly noting the ways in which this common pool resource has and is being destroyed, in the absence of commons institutions.

The concept of the anti-commons was developed by Michael Heller in 1998 ([The Tragedy of the Anticommons: Property in the Transition from Marx to Markets](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=57627)

papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=57627) to point to the potential underuse of scarce shopfront properties by overly pro-private regulations and also the underuse of public scientific resources caused by excessive intellectual property rights and overpatenting in biomedical research. Might not this concept be used to highlight the underuse of the capacity to produce in economies dominated by a business cycle of boom and depression, where unemployment is used as a means of protecting profits from the pressures of labour; or in enterprises where methods of management predominate based on command and hierarchy rather than collaboration, support and continuing education by doing; or by an entrenched gender division of labour that makes much of the reproduction of labour a private responsibility and, in the process, a source of subordination and oppression?

All such arguments from the idea of the anti-commons are controversial and in need of further research. Positive strategies of commons design can certainly not be induced from simply imagining a reversal of these realities. But these causes of the contemporary tragedy of the anti-commons can act as stimuli to research into the applications of Elinor Ostrom's eight principles. This research might, for example, include investigating what lessons/insights arise from the limits – and very occasionally the potential – of existing institutions (such as labour exchanges, protective labour legislation, organisations of labour – most notably the trade unions – and forms of socialised or state reproduction care) that have tried practically to ameliorate the causes of a tragedy of anti-commons with regard to labour from the point of view of the dilemmas that the eight principles have to resolve.