



BOOK REVIEW

The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society, 2021, Franklin Obeng-Odoom, University of Toronto Press, i–xv + 264 pp. ISBN: 9781487513900

Review by

Juliette Alenda-Demoutiez *

Nijmegen, Radboud University

* Email: Juliette.alenda-demoutiez@ru.nl

Abstract

The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society is a thorough demonstration of the problem of western-centered analyses in the political economic and economics disciplines. Even if used with the best intentions, the concept of commons in these western frameworks is far from reflecting the reality of other contexts and histories. Franklin Obeng-Odoom offers a fascinating and important perspective of the socio-ecological dimensions of land and thus an important reflection on the commons in the Global South.

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The ‘tragedy of commons’, resonates with a large audience: students, economists and political economists, but also practitioners in the development and environmental fields. However, the tragedy itself but also the solutions to deal with it are strongly limited to understand socioecological processes in the Global South. *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty* is an important call to re-centre the analysis on land, justice issues, and transdisciplinarity; all being elements that are lacking in traditional economic analysis but also in political economy, still focused on labour and capital. One important strength of this book is that it could easily be used as a textbook for political economy students but is also an important piece discussing fundamental issues for research and policy-making. It is an amazing state of the art about commons and, by thoroughly explaining the limitations of existing analytical frameworks, offers an alternative to rethink commons.

Until now, commons in the Global South have been analysed through the lens of two main Western-centered analysis. The first one is what the author labels as the ‘Conventional Wisdom’, arising from the tragedy of commons and new institutional economics following Elinor Ostrom. This framework is strongly limited as it translates the Western view of the tragedy and its solutions to the Global South, with private property and commodification of nature as the path to progress.

It thus ignores many central issues as land, justice, and the social reproduction of ecological crises. The second framework is the opposite, what the author calls the 'Western Left Consensus'. This fundamentally anti-capitalist framework considers commons as the solution to neoliberalism. But this framework suffers from the same limitation as the first one, trying to translate other Western-centered views, in this case socialism, to the Global South. Overall, both consensuses consider land as a factor of production. And both are limited in the solutions they offer: private property for the first one and commoning everything for the second can actually lead to many new social problems and justice issues.

The book thus offers a 'Radical Alternative', conceiving a social state reflecting the values of the society it serves, and not translating aspirations from the West in one way or the other. This holistic analysis resonates strongly with other authors who have worked on alternatives to mainstream analysis but have been generally silenced, or used only by marginal groups of economists and political economists, as Polanyi. In the *Great Transformation*, Polanyi advocated for an economic analysis centered on the 'nature-needs-institutions' triad, instead of the 'market-scarcity-rationality' arising from mainstream frameworks. He theorised that capitalism was supported by specific institutions, and especially fictitious commodities, as land. This book is, thus, at the border of many different old and current perspectives. It is overall a matter of bringing justice back in the analysis of commons by giving a central place to land, but also of giving a voice to southern thinkers that are often overlooked, even in the Western Left Consensus, as is evidently the case with how the work of Wangari Maathai, embraced in the book under review, is overlooked in both the 'Conventional Wisdom' and the 'Western Left Consensus'.

Commons themselves are far from being new in the history of the Global South, but this historical perspective is typically seen from the existing analytical frameworks in the economics and the political economy disciplines. In the first part of the book, the author thus comes back on the history of the commodification of land, to understand the strong socioecological implications in Africa nowadays and to reflect on the way forward. From this, the following chapters aim at systematically consider the limits of the 'Conventional Wisdom' and the 'Western Left Consensus' for different aspects of the commons (cities, water, oil) and to reflect on the 'Radical Alternative'.

This 'Radical Alternative' is first based on a better understanding of the land as the unit of analysis. Land is not capital that can be substituted with other forms of capital as labour. It is not a thing or a commodity, but a socio-ecological relation. Research about rent and redistribution should be considered in this perspective. Land is strongly related to nature, to people, to different generations, to symbolic and varied views that communities may have around the world. It is strongly echoing what happens with development and environmental programmes and the words of Evo Morales in 2010: "in order to achieve reforestation, some people are proposing to commodify the forests by arguing, falsely, that only that which has a price and an owner is worthy of our attention." This 'Radical Alternative' also insists on the dynamic dimension of land, in opposition with the static view of both the 'Conventional Wisdom' and the 'Western Left Consensus'. Finally, the vision of land is also global, another limitation of both traditional perspectives of commons, reflecting on imperialism, colonialism and the strongly unequal international capitalist structures.

The 'Radical Alternative' can thus exist only if we profoundly transform the institutions supporting capitalism but also its alternatives. In this perspective, markets continue to exist but are transformed into socioecological markets, supportive of gifts, solidarity, and exchange rather than seeking one vision of exchange for all (being capitalism or socialism). Such alternative is very important to overcome the dualistic view of the path we could take to achieve sustainable development. It is complementary to many works and movements advocating for decolonising research and development, and opens new perspectives for political economy as economics.

Biographical Notes

After completing her PhD in France, Juliette served as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Amsterdam. She is now an Assistant Professor in the chair of economic theory and policy at the Radboud University. Her areas of expertise include sustainability, governance, institutions, indicators and social economy, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. She coordinates the research group Transformative sustainable change in Action at Radboud University.

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