A Commons Perspective on Human-Nature Relations: Analysis, Visions, and Strategies for Alternative Futures

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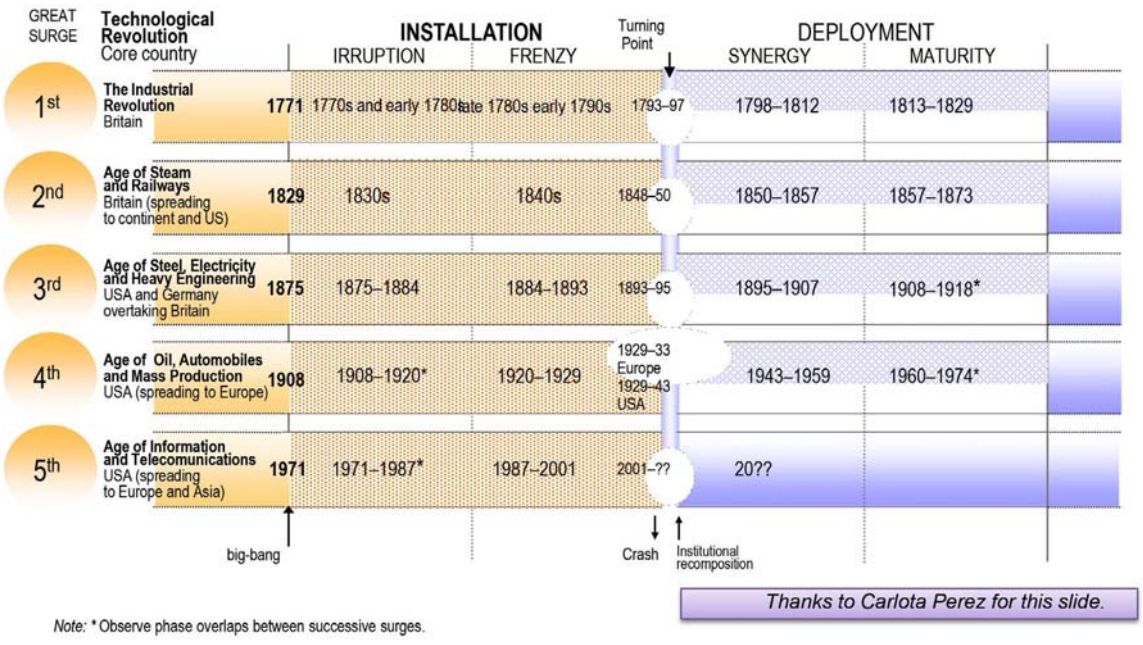
I offer here some reflections on the commons. In particular, I reflect upon the question "How does the commons, as an alternative perspective, see the relationship between humans and nature?"

This question is actually central to my current vocation as an academic, someone who works in the university, and particularly to my subject called "political economy." In essence, political

Technological Revolutions, or "Techno-economic Paradigms"

Approximate dates of the installation and deployment periods of the great surges of development -- 1771 to the present



Note: * Observe phase overlaps between successive surges.

economy is the study of the struggle for power and resources in which we seek to investigate: "Who gets what power and resources, where, when, how, why, and for whom?"

Capitalism and the Conflictual Relationship Between Humans and Nature

The major development problems of the world today are well known: (1) poverty and inequality, (2) resource wars and conflicts, (3) climate change and ecological degradation, (4) recurrent economic crises, and (5) social injustices. Each of these problems is rooted in the conflictual relationship of humans with nature—and within it, the antagonistic relationship between humans—that have been structured by the prevailing capitalist system.

Despite capitalism's series of economic crises, and the socio-political challenges that confront its legitimacy, we are still at this point in history of the "universalization" of the capitalist system—from the global institutions to states to local communities. Today's global problems are not only the manifest "contradictions" of the current stage of the capitalist system, nor a "mismanagement" of the capitalist mode of production, but it is "capitalism" itself—the very logic that values: (a) markets over societies; (b) profits over peoples; (c) production for profits and not for needs; (d) privatizing public assets, while socializing risks and costs; and (e) the commodification of nature and human life.

Capitalism survives and reproduces itself in, and through, the market by pursuing these logics of profit-maximization, competition, privatization, and commodification. This dependence of capitalism on the market for the system's survival and reproduction has taken the ideological form and concrete set of socio-economic policies since the 1980s that are now regarded as "neoliberalism." The central strategy by which neoliberal capitalism creates wealth and value is through the contradictory process of "accumulation by dispossession" that can be observed in countless practices that are becoming the norm in the ways business and state governance are conducted today such as privatization, land-grabbing, land conversion, and the extractive industries. Privatization, or the transfer of a government property to a private sector, entails the deprivation of citizens' public assets that they originally owned as a collective. The corporate practices of land-grabbing, land conversion, and the extractive industries to generate more money and material wealth, while exploiting the environment, are usually done with the aid of the coercive apparatuses of governments—the police, military, and the judicial courts—to effect the displacements of local communities and indigenous peoples through the use of force, harassment, violence, or legalese techniques.

Since the 1980s, neoliberal capitalist policies, which have framed production systems for the export market and the strategy of creating demands for goods, have also given tremendous powers to corporations to produce goods way beyond the real wages and consuming capacity of workers. Neoliberalism has further accelerated the Earth system's transition into what scientists call the "Anthropocene," a new geological epoch in humans-nature relationship which seems to have become more noticeable since the mid-20th century marked by the pervasiveness of human activities that interferes, competes, or conflicts with the Earth's natural processes. Neoliberalism's growth obsession combined with, firstly, the cumulative maturity of capitalism's techno-economic paradigms between the 1800s and the 1960s (i.e., from

the industrial revolution to the full development of steam, railways, steel, electricity, heavy engineering, oil, automobiles, and mass production); and secondly, the installation phase of the current information and communications technology period since the early 1970s. Neoliberal capitalism during this Anthropocene geological period now appears to be leading us to unprecedented ecological and planetary crises characterized by deforestation, lesser biodiversity, warmer temperatures, higher sea levels, and extreme weather conditions.

The concept of "natural resource governance" is one of the modern buzzwords in development studies and practice. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, we are thus urged to critically ask a fundamental question about this concept: "Who governs, and governance for whom?" First, at the global scale, patterns and relations of colonialism persist between industrialized countries specializing in high-tech production and rich consumption, and peripheral countries specializing in poor economic activities supplying raw materials. The European Commission, for instance, continues to strategically use its foreign and aid policy to secure access to Africa's rare minerals and raw materials to sustain Europe's high-tech industries and satisfy consumer demands. Second, in multilateral institutions, corporate polluters themselves have captured the institutional mechanisms and policy negotiations on addressing climate change. An essentially neoliberal climate policy is being forged and formulated where production systems remain to be market-oriented, oil-based, and fossil fuel-dependent. Third, at local or national level, we see political-business alliances versus society's communities where corporations ally with governments in the process of accumulation by dispossession. Governance is done and regulations are enforced for markets rather than the common weal.

With the way capitalism is progressing through the maintenance of relations of inequality between peoples and through the abuse of the natural environment, it is commonsensical that the capitalist system itself cannot also be sustained in the foreseeable future. But, time and again, we must accept the fact that capitalism cannot collapse on its own.

A Commons Project as an Alternative

Day by day, we are confronted with morally intolerable realities in the world. From time to time, we hear and read of alternative ideas to prevailing elitist political-economic structures and consumerist lifestyles. Indeed, our moral sentiments and ideological reasons are more than compelling to critique the dominance of capitalist values on peoples' lives and to seek out alternative futures. What is most urgently needed at this historical moment is to build on our "analyses and critiques" of current realities by coming up with collective "visions" of alternative futures, and importantly think through practicable "strategies" to realize these visions.

One of the most promising and viable alternatives to neoliberal capitalist development that are now happening across continents in many different local communities and organizations in the world—from the cyberspace to South and North Americas, to Asia, Africa, and Europe—is the project of "the commons" which, among other things, envisions and strategizes a harmonious (rather than conflictive or abusive) relationship of humanity with nature. The precondition for such harmonious relationship between humans and nature is a harmonious relationship between human beings on how to live well and lead a good life individually and together in a shared environment.

While the project of the commons is in the process of becoming a true alternative which needs to be mapped out by various collectives from the international level to states to workplaces to communities in order to re-shape and re-define humanity's relationship with nature, I wish to offer some key propositions and guiding principles for the present and future of the commons project. I sketch out a commons project for the time being—i.e., commons as an analysis, a vision, and a strategy.

Analysis of the Commons

The commons perspective is an alternative analysis to the dominant discourse of "The Tragedy of the Commons," which is simply a fable that has been influential in shaping peoples' worldviews and in making socioeconomic policies since the mid-1960s. The Tragedy of the Commons thesis is based on the assumption that all humans are rational and as such motivated by selfish interests; thus shared resources inevitably result in abuse and destruction. This therefore justifies private ownership which is assumed to be better at the maintenance and management of the productive use of common resources. But isn't it capitalistic behaviour of private individuals and corporations, further encouraged by neoliberal policies for limitless capital accumulation and privatized growth, that have, on record, destroyed common resources and ruined ecosystems?

The commons perspective is a critique of The Tragedy of the Commons thesis of mutually indifferent, self-interested individuals. It believes in the will and capacity of human beings, individually and collectively, to share with, and care for, one other in the ethos of community solidarity. It appreciates the capability of communities to set up systems and processes of self- regulation and self-governance with the view to the virtues of responsibility, equality, and sustainability.

Visions of the Commons

The commons envisions an alternative production system to the prevailing capitalist mode of production. A focus on production is a first-order agenda for the redistributive goals of the commons project. An alternative production system to produce wealth to satisfy people's needs and create value for equitable social redistribution can be "green"—i.e., technologically feasible, economically sufficient, socially acceptable, politically doable, and ecologically sustainable. While it encourages the development of sustainable communities, it likewise understands the necessity of an ecological synergy between rural and urban activities; and between the sectors of manufacturing, agriculture, services, and micro-small-medium enterprises.

The commons project also envisions an alternative system of exchange. It regards the market, which is the space for the exchange of goods and labour value, not as a goal per se; but as a tool for socio-economic and ecological well-being, and for living well and the good life.

An extremely important goal of the commons is the democratization of natural resources. Democracy means "people power" at all levels, from the state to workplaces to communities to households. Political and economic democracy has, at the minimum, the objectives of social justice, civil freedoms, equality, and equitable distribution of wealth. In essence, democracy shall be the driving mechanism of the governance of—and relations within—the polity, economy, society, and shared natural resources.

At the levels of both states and inter-national relations, the commons is a way of human living-together in a shared space and time based on the values of political democracy, economic self-sufficiency, cultural diversity, ecological sustainability, and human solidarity. In smaller scales, the commons observes the spirit of democratic, self-governing communities with local systems of governance in making collective binding decisions on the conduct of people-to-people relationships and the management of the natural environment.

The commons vision is neither heaven nor nirvana where every living and non-living things are at peace and in harmony at all times. Conflicts exist in human relations and social life, and there will be conflicts even within a functioning social commons. But institutions and mechanisms will be in place, anchored to collectively agreed upon system of principles, in which conflicts are duly resolved always in favour of the common good, or the well-being of humans and nature.

Strategies for the Commons

At present, what can and should be done towards attaining an ecological production systems is an economic policy shift from the focus on "growth" (i.e., by ever increasing investments to generate higher and higher GDP or gross domestic product) to the goals and strategies of "full employment" (i.e., ensuring people's decent productive work in manufacturing, agriculture, and service sectors, as well as creative work in the arts, and livelihood through enterprises) and "basic income" (i.e., the provision of needs-based unconditional incomes to households and individuals to allow them lead a life of dignity). Local and global economies cannot anymore continue to grow, let alone be sustained, by ceaseless exploitation of climate and the environment. The economic policy goals and strategies of full employment and basic incomes do not only lead to what progressive economists call "de-growth" or "zero growth" in the economy, but they can also create conditions for ecological production systems and green economic activities.

A key strategy of the commons project is to attempt to reorient, if not reclaim, the state for the telos of the good life. As a political philosopher once put it, "A state comes into existence for the purpose of ensuring life, and it continues to exist for the purpose of the good life."

The commons project must also engage in the strategy of changing people's mentalities through education for a variety of reasons. One purpose is to understand the realities of "political economy" to contribute to the process of awakening the consciousness of peoples and communities regarding the realpolitik of vested interests in politics, the economy, and the management of natural resources. That the struggle for power and resources in the spaces we share is real, serious, and everywhere. That we are all part and involved in this struggle.

The other critical purpose of education is for people to rediscover "science," or to at least to learn to combine faith with science, especially in appreciating natural processes of the Earth and in comprehending "man-made" disasters and sufferings that result from natural calamities like earthquakes, floods, tsunami, and volcanic eruptions. It has been observed that many influential religious groups and individuals are quick to pronounce that natural disasters and their unpleasant and deadly aftermath are "acts of god," or that these are signs of "god's wrath" on the people who died and the families and friends who suffer from these tragedies. Their

beliefs often point to supernatural curse, hastily making judgements that those who have been "punished" to death, misery, trauma, or loss are the "sinful" and "wicked" ones.

Historically, however, an appreciation of science could contribute to the learning of many peoples that many of these sufferings are man-made, or inflicted by humanity, which can be prevented and avoided. In other words, many of the miseries in the world have been caused not by "god" but by men. Tragedies from natural disasters are becoming tragic manifestations of the worsening disrespectful, hostile, and alienated relationship of human beings with nature. Humanity's caring and loving sense of nature and the environment has long been missing. Humanity has a high degree of free will in relating with nature. Thus, humanity should and can be reconciled with nature—personally, ideologically, technologically, and policy-wise.

Education is a cornerstone of sustainability by imparting knowledge and nurturing wisdom for present and future generations. Science and technology know-how can complement a local culture's rich tacit knowledge and technical innovations in the collective management and improvement of shared natural resources.

Moreover, the commons project is engaged in the creation of a culture, or a counter-culture. It believes in the cultural capacities of peoples and communities for learning and cognitive development, including the responsible ways of managing natural resources. It understands culture not only as a way of life of a particular community to be observed and respected, but also as an arena of struggle and opposing tendencies. Apparently, there have been cultural practices, traditions, and belief systems causing harm, damage, or danger to human life, to human relationships, and the ecosystem that need to be re-examined, if not stopped altogether.

Finally, the commons is a "counter-movement" of organized socio-political groups. As "a learning movement," the commons is idealistic yet pragmatic who are mindful of the importance of specific context or particular local conditions in decision-making, and who could draw lessons from history as well as the good and best practices of ecologically sustainable solutions and communities existing elsewhere. These progressive socio-political movements will carry out the strategies to create the necessary global and social conditions to make possible the realization of the visions of the commons for: 1) alternative systems of production and exchange; 2) the democratization of the use and management of social-economic wealth and natural resources; and 3) the reconciliation of humanity with nature.

For now, the most urgent task of the commons movement is to not only talk about the need for alternative futures; but to make these sustainable communities and alternative ways of living-together tangible, visible, and really existing in every space possible and imaginable.