

POSITION PAPER
The Commons in Latin America
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Latin America in the Midst of Change: Crisis and Opportunities

Latin America entered the 21st century with new hope of change. After thriving for a period, however, the region currently faces new economic, social and political crises. Growth, poverty reduction, social inclusion and consolidation of democratic institutions have given way to economic recession, social dissatisfaction, dismantling of social policies and intensifying conflicts. Although such a cycle of adversity is not without precedent in the region, this setback figures in new local, national and global contexts. While recent trends aggravate problems of inequality, insecurity, conservatism and unsustainability, various groups within Latin American societies are also realizing and experiencing positive transformations, ranging from empowerment and recognition to development of different forms of cultural and political expression.

In the new context of crisis and transformation, Latin America has long experienced disproportionately unequal development, which has fueled academic paradigms focused on dependency, inequity, informality and violence. This prevailing image of a region with failing states and fragmented societies has obscured powerful creative and constructive processes. In addition to considering structural elements, we examine the agency of new expressions, identities, initiatives, policies and daily realities on the ground that drive social interaction and innovation. Their creative force reshapes Latin American societies, not by ignoring the past but by dealing with and re-interpreting historical lessons and legacies.

Macro-level scholarly interest in changes, actions, discourses and images must be related to the empirical evidence of the many micro-level dynamics stemming from everyday life practices, initiatives, struggles and resistance through which citizens employ their agency, whether individually or collectively. In this context, the commons approach offers a fruitful analytical perspective for combining a range of processes, actors and contexts. Aside from their importance in the region's history and imagery, collective experiences regarding territory, identity and narratives may operationalize a plural perspective on the commons in the current process of reshaping of the Latin American society and allow engagement across disciplines and actors (including activists, practitioners, policy-makers and corporations) to better understand the region's particular course of development.

In this short essay an agenda for the study of the commons in Latin America is presented. In the next sections, the commons analytical perspective is described, followed by a proposal for applying the commons perspective in the Latin American context. The final section connects the Latin American commons agenda to the *Commons Co-Lab*, to take place in Amsterdam on December 12-13, 2017.

The Commons as a Connecting Analytical Perspective

Commons is a concept in construction broadly defined as tangible and intangible resources shared by a group of individuals shaping patterns of access, use and reproduction. This analytical concept emerged as an alternative to the fixed public-private divide that masks other forms of appropriation and governance models. It has evolved from a narrow contextual focus on social dilemmas in social-ecological systems into an integrative analytical perspective to address social change at large. The incorporation of cultural and political resources allows for an analysis of social processes not only around traditional 'commons' (natural resources such as water, forest, fish, land, ocean, air) but also relating to the what are known as new commons (e.g., knowledge, memories, identities, urban public spaces, digital spaces, collective practices). The commons perspective has become a vibrant interdisciplinary field to articulate theoretical questions usually polarized by domains that may be geographic (e.g., rural and urban commons), scalar (e.g., local to global commons), institutional (e.g., formal and informal commons) and tangible (e.g., material and immaterial commons).

The commons research agenda emerged in the 1990s as a critical perspective on the dominant property rights arrangements based on neoliberal, top-down policies. Grounded in Hardin's seminal work 'The tragedy of the commons,' natural resources were treated as vulnerable to depletion due to absence of property rights, and privatization or statization was urged to ensure sustainable use. Social scientists, however, proposed a new category of goods - common-pool resources (CPR) - characterized by rivalry (exploitation by one individual implies reduced availability for others) and non-excludability (exclusion of others is difficult). Rich empirical evidence from community-based management of natural resources worldwide has revealed that CPRs faced social dilemmas but were not inherently open access. This body of research has not only refuted Hardin's model but has also revealed that the proposed solutions to the CPR dilemmas – privatization or statization – in fact caused longstanding, well-functioning, collective governance systems to erode.

During this early stage, the commons debate transitioned into a highly fruitful interdisciplinary field, integrating plural theoretical and methodological perspectives. Multiple perspectives contributed to the understanding of emergence, performance and erosion of local institutions. Focused on the interplay between local agency and resource sustainability, scholars highlighted key factors driving the commoning process grounded in social capital, traditional knowledge, historical legacies and political empowerment. Emphasizing institutional incentives, local context and successful commoning experiences, however, led to gradual disengagement by scholars interested in environmental conflicts and injustices in the 'commons' debate. In addition, the commons epistemic community has gradually become less diverse, as neo-institutionalism has come to dominate theoretical narrative, especially after the Nobel Prize was awarded to leading theorist Elinor Ostrom.

The increasing body of literature on cultural and political commons has opened new channels to address commoning initiatives observed in different contexts beyond natural resources. This broader perspective has prompted extending the CPR concept into the 'commons'. The traditional commons, defined in terms of type of goods and analyzed from the perspective of rights, contrasts

with the 'new commons,' which includes intangible resources and expands the focus to co-creation, sharing and reproduction. Unlike CPRs, these resources are not inherently 'commons' but socially constructed, as commoning materializes from particular collectivities. Processes related to sharing identities, economies, practices, memories, learning and spaces constitute some of the new commons discernible in many parts of the world. In this research program, we explore the analytical potential of combining plural perspectives on the traditional and new commons to understand the way Latin American society is reshaping.

While the commons remains loosely defined, its added value derives mainly from the related concept of commoning. Commoning refers to a process of collective action to co-create, self-govern and reproduce particular spaces, resources, practices, symbols or ideas. By emphasizing structure and agency dialectics, the commons can serve as a reference for articulating theories, methods and practices of de-commoning and re-commoning. Although Latin American societies have been marked by these two antagonistic forces, the literature addressing these processes in the region is deeply fragmented. Notwithstanding the similar focus on commoning processes addressed by a broad range of disciplines, cross-fertilization among plural 'commons' perspectives is only starting to crystallize. In particular, engagement in the commons debate has highlighted natural resources and rural transformations. Moreover, the commons has become a solid concept for transdisciplinary networks bridging practice, policy and science. While such networks have emerged around natural resources and socioenvironmental change in Latin America, a similar trend around cultural resources and urban transformations has been less evident. Addressing commoning initiatives in the region as a sociocultural trend and alternative development models for different processes in the region enables a range of processes in Latin America not only to be connected regionally but to be considered in cross-regional comparisons as well.

Latin America Commons as Showcase

Despite a rich body of literature addressing several aspects of reshaping Latin American societies, disciplinary, thematic and scalar divides impede understanding them as part of similar processes. This highly urbanized region rich in resources has undergone recent social transformations combining deepened democratization and empowerment with increased inequalities and insecurities. The commons perspective may provide new angles for examining context, values, norms and interactions around valuable tangible and intangible resources at large.

Tensions between enclosure and sharing, overuse and sustainability, and social dilemmas are central to this perspective. Regarding *enclosure and sharing*, de-commoning territories, knowledge, memories and practices has long been contested (at least since colonization). Intensified enclosure by neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 90s contrasts with experiences in re-commoning private and public spaces shaped by everyday life practices, social policies and increased democratization observed in the region. *Overuse and sustainability* derives from increased demand for natural, financial and human resources and urban spaces. The region's history of dispossession has implied structural overuse of its commons and contrasts with local solutions to protect natural resources and urban environment and to minimize threats from

climate change and globalization. Finally, regarding *social dilemmas*, ethnic, gender, generational and class tensions contrast with creative collective actions to resist de-commonization and to promote re-commonization in rural and urban spaces. Everyday life practices, conflicts and resistance are directly related to co-creation and sharing of values and norms underlying the commons and to steering social capital, political imagination and leadership. Trust, knowledge and common understanding may, for example, support joint efforts and sharing experiences, whereas freeriding, rent-seeking and copycat behavior may halt innovation and lead to fragmentation in reproduction of commons.

We contend that Latin American Studies will not only benefit from the integrative analytical approach provided by the 'commons' to bridge some divides such as urban-rural, local-global, material-immaterial and formal-informal. The region also offers a fruitful foundation for critiquing and elaborating the commons perspectives. How values, symbols, narratives, identities, territories, goods or digital spaces are commonized or decommonized by state and non-state actors, for example, relates directly to both traditional and new commons. In this regard, five transversal research topics have been identified as potential areas of development for studying the reshaping of Latin American societies supported by – but not restricted to – the commons perspective. They combine enduring debates and emergent research questions.

First, premises of the commons theory may be tested and challenged by particular Latin American contexts. For example, social permeability, multiple and changing identities and hybrid institutions observed in the region challenge the well-defined social boundaries and shared values provided by the design principles proposed by Elinor Ostrom. Similarly, the deeply politicized and unequal grounds where the commons are contested challenge perspectives centered on individual incentives and bounded rationality (e.g., transaction costs and incomplete information). Finally, the notion of the commons as an alternative to arranging private and public property rights can be challenged by hybrid appropriation and reproduction, such as security, education and health, in which private, public and collective spheres may co-exist and compete.

Second, the normative perspective to commoning processes can be contested by the way external actors promote 'community-based' models in the region. The frequently unequal conditions in which commoning takes place in Latin America challenges the promises promoted by researchers, practitioners, donors and policy-makers. While many commoning initiatives in the region represent genuine bottom-up processes rooted in strong social capital and local knowledge, recent efforts by the state and NGOs to create 'communities' and foster 'collective actions' merit more critical analysis. On the one hand, the role of the progressive priests (Theology of Liberation) in the 1970s and 80s and the recent wave of progressive national governments have provided mechanisms to support commoning processes, such as traditional territories and community-based governance systems. On the other hand, elite groups have redefined the meaning of 'community,' 'participation' and 'local governance' for their own benefit to retain their access to and control over the commons.

Third, assumptions of harmonious and cohesive commoners in commons literature overlook local tensions, inequalities and multiple interests. The colonial history of social hierarchy, clientelism and chauvinism in Latin America is reflected in community structures often fragmented by

political, religious, generational and gender tensions. Collective actions among marginalized groups may mask internal tensions and lead to new inequalities. Discerning analysis of the communities, taking into account their multiple identities, interests and intersectionalities, may yield a more nuanced analysis of commoning processes as strategies to tackle both internal and external power structures and of how they enhance or mitigate tensions across age, gender, ethnicity and class among collectivities.

Fourth, multi-scale processes shaping struggles over the commons raises questions regarding the best scale for analyzing a particular commoning experience to address transboundary issues. Fuzzy spatial boundaries between rural and urban spaces observed in the Latin American context challenge the rural and urban commons divide in academic literature. Although some resources are clearly urban commons relating to access to public space and services, increased flow of resources, people and ideas between rural-urban spaces challenges distinctive social and geographic boundaries. Peri-urban areas are increasingly becoming the social arena for negotiating and redefining both rural and urban commoning practices; while flowing resources such water, food, energy, symbols and values are key elements linking commoning and decommoning in both spaces.

Fifth, while the commons debate has been mainly shaped by scholars from other regions, the Latin American context offers new elements that may advance theoretical elaboration in this field. The region has been an arena of bottom-up commoning and recommoning that merits special attention in commons research. Recommoning territories by the Zapatistas and the Landless Workers Movements, recommoning identities by Indigenous, maroons and other traditional populations, recommoning memories by political conflict victims, recommoning economies by economic models based on solidarity, recommoning biodiversity by protecting traditional seeds and development of agroforestry systems and recommoning narratives by the Buen Vivir discourse figure among the regional perspectives that may help chart a Latin American perspective for the commons.

The commons may thus be a supporting analytical strategy for understanding the reshaping Latin American society while creating channels for cross-regional comparative analysis. This analytical perspective may help identify similarities and differences in de-commoning and re-commoning within Latin America in comparison with other regions (South-South and North-South) to contribute to current debates, such as Post-Colonial Studies, Rights to the City, Environmental Justice and Critical Institutionalism.

The Commons Co-Lab

As described in the previous sections, many theoretical debates in Latin American Studies have been consolidated within a range of analytical perspectives. The commons perspective does not offer any new theoretical guidance but provides an analytical framework for jointly investigating multiple processes addressed by a range of theoretical approaches. The Commons Co-Lab aims to

critique and assess the potential, as well as the possible limitations, of the commons analytical perspectives for studying Latin American societies according to two guiding goals.

- 1) Assess whether the commons perspective can accommodate multiple theoretical approaches and foster a plural commons perspective to study Latin American societies.
- 2) Assess the value and challenges of the commons perspective as a narrative to bridge different occupational fields in the region, such as researchers, practitioners and policy-makers.

The Commons Co-Lab will serve as a learning space for reflecting on and discussing opportunities and limitations in applying the commons concept in our own research and practical work. We invite scholars, PhD students, practitioners, activists and policy-makers interested or active in Latin America to submit proposals to participate in this unique event on the Latin American commons!