Crisis, neoliberalism, tragedies, and the commons: from the common spring to the spring of the commons

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I. Crises

The planet is burning! This phrase is now everywhere — from activists' manifestos to the studies of scientists and writers.[1] Thus, we observe the unfolding of a paradigm shift, in which the conceptual framework through which scientists, and people in general, perceive the world is being replaced.[2] It marks a significant moment in human history, as scientific research has direct implications for practices such as modes of production (energy) and the consumption habits of a significant part of the global population.[3]

In this new framework, traces of human activity have been strongly recognized, starting from the beginnings of modernity, which aimed at the constant expansion of rationality and human dominance over nature, the environment, and people.[4] The ongoing loss of biodiversity and the increase in the average temperature of the planet, with all the natural phenomena it entails, are directly related to the spirit that pervades human activities.[5]

This situation constitutes another crisis of our time, linked both to the economy and politics, as well as deeply connected to a cultural crisis

[1] See Greta Thunberg, "Our House Is On Fire", World Economic Forum, 2019, J. Salama, "Earth Is on Fire", Scientific America, January 1, 2021, M. Lawrence and L. Laybourn-Langton Planet on Fire: A Manifesto for the Age of Environmental Breakdown, London: Verso, 2021.
[2] Kuhn, S. Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962.
[3] N. Klein, This changes everything, Penguin, 2015, p. 452.
[4] See Horkheimer, Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. Castoriadis, "The 'rationality of capitalism", in *Figures of the thinkable*, Stanford University Press, 2007 and Bookchin, The next revolution, London: Verso, 2015.
[5] «World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice». *BioScience*, 67 (12): 1026–1028. 13 November 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/bix125.

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that gives rise to the spirit of the era: 'Today, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'.[6] This famous phrase describes quite well the situation we find ourselves in regarding the cultural background of this era of crises, fluidity, and uncertainty. After all, each crisis is often experienced as a crisis of historical continuity and narrative, through which individuals connect with the socio-historical and construct their identity. The crisis thus becomes the interregnum where the old has not died, and the new cannot be born, often giving rise to many morbid conditions.[7]

As implied by the origin of the word 'crisis' (from the ancient Greek verb 'krino': to separate, to decide), such a condition leads to the need to make a judgment between two conflicting choices. In medical terminology, the exit from the crisis requires the organism to invent something new, a new way of life (of course, without being able to return to the previous state that caused the crisis).[8]

Especially in times of crisis, consciousness is the only necessary and sufficient condition for creating and developing a new social condition. This can be achieved based on an interaction between science, consciousness, and politics. It is an open relationship that unfolds within the historical *creation*,[9] both on a planetary and local level.

On the one hand, this process can lead to a further consolidation of the ruling model and its practices, in a direction of finding technical solutions to continue creating new markets and transferring responsibility to the freedom of individual (consumer) choice. On the other hand, new forms can be created, new webs woven, and prefigurations of a new society emerge through the creative, spontaneous, and experimental game of self-organization.[10] Within this process, the subject itself often transforms.[11] Essentially, we aim to illustrate that movements

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[6] Mark Fisher *Capitalist realism. Is there no alternative?,* London: Zero Books, 2009.

[7] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971 p. 276.

[8] Michel Serres, *Times of Crisis*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

[9] Suzi Adams (editor), *Ricoeur and Castoriadis in Discussion: On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017.

[10] Edgar Morin, *The Lost Paradigm: Human Nature*, Seuil, 1973.

[11] As it is currently quite difficult to identify a subject-agent of social change, in the sense of a solid and unified identity, we could turn to more contemporary terms that update the debate, such as Rancière's 'the part that has no part, which tries to describe the birth of politics and the invasion into history of that part of people who have no part in the decisions concerning their lives, and with whom the demand for equality and justice is activated. For Rancière, any subjectification is a disidentification, as politics critiques existing identifications by opening new individual and collective possibilities. See, *Dis-agreement*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p.30.

surpassing utopian ideals and manifesting in the present are rooted in the activities of the commons.

II. Neoliberalism

In our era, the classical modern perception of the distinction between humans and nature belongs to the past. Now, it is a common understanding that the human being is a part of nature and is in direct correlation and interaction with its environment. The human being is thus recognized as a biopsychosocial entity.[12] Similarly, environmental issues, such as climate and environmental crises, are, and should primarily be treated as, social problems.[13]

Today, both societies and the environment face intense pressures from the dominant governance model. Neoliberalism claims that human well-being can be more effectively ensured by a system in which businesses are not subject to control but operate within a framework of strong property rights supported by the free market.

In this context, the obligations of the state remain strong, mainly concerning market institutions and those related to the protection of individual property rights. As we have often seen, if necessary for the smooth functioning of the free market, it employs all methods of repression and abuse of authority by law enforcement (often with tragic consequences, as in the case of Vasilis Maggos) and legal prosecutions (something that applies to almost all cases presented in this volume). Finally, it is driven by the need to continually create markets in areas that do not yet exist, such as health and the environment, and then withdraw.[14]

Thus, the neoliberal model is not so much related to productive investments as it is to what Marx once described as "primitive accumulation" of capital. It is a process of privatization and enclosures through which social goods and rights are transformed into commodities (what is officially called the "structural adjustment" of a national economy). The plundering and enclosures describe well a variety of cases (such as those in this volume).

But perhaps a more essential characteristic of neoliberalism seems to be that it simultaneously transforms all social relations.[15] It is a new way of rational governance,

[12] Edgar Morin, *ibid*.
[13] Brian Tokar, *Toward climate justice: perspectives on the Climate Crisis and Social Change*, 2010 [See Chapter 5].
[14] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Oxford University Press, 2005.
[15] Dardot- Laval, *Commun. Essai sur la révolution au XXIe siècle*, Paris : La Découverte, 2014.

according to which all aspects of existence are now governed by the economy and calculation, radically transforming the spheres of individual experience and practice.[16]

In the context of this model, businesses gain even more power,[17] while competition replaces solidarity and social bonds through which, in the past, individuals faced the fear and uncertainties of fragile human conditions, contributing to greater social indifference.[18] Neoliberalism now moves relatively easily beyond the classical antagonism between freedom and equality, as we often saw expressed in political thought, separating freedom from any social dimension, placing it in the field of individual practice and consumer choice of policies and products, and positioning it at the same level as passive contemplation.

III. Tragedies of commons

In 1968, Garrett Hardin published an article titled "The Tragedy of the Commons" in *Science*.[19] The core issue was the rapid increase in the global population compared to Earth's limited resources, raising concerns about self-restraint. The article gained prominence for Hardin's example of a common pasture.

Hardin asks us to envision a common pasture, accessible to all, where various shepherds bring their sheep to graze. He argues that due to individuals' natural inclination to maximize personal gain, each shepherd will choose to increase their flock, believing it will not impact the common pasture. This inherent tendency, according to Hardin, leads to the inevitable destruction of the common land in this case, and the commons in general. Thus comes the tragedy of the commons.

According to Hardin, every individual is trapped in a closed system, compelled to endlessly grow their flock in a limited world. Thus, the freedom of access to common resources inevitably results in destruction. To address and prevent this catastrophe, one of Hardin's proposed solutions is state intervention and privatization of commons, making individuals responsible for their actions. This example has been widely used by economists, politicians, and scientists, advocating for neoliberal programs or/and state intervention in the name of “realpolitik”. However, the use of this particular example generates a series of concerns.

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[16] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, 2017.
[17] Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy,* Polity, 2004.
[18] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty,* Polity, 2007.
[19] Garret Hardin, “The tragedy of the commons”, *Science*, 1968, 162: 3859, pp. 1243-1248.

Firstly, the structure of Hardin's thought strongly resembles that of Thomas Hobbes.[20] The English philosopher, living in a time of uprisings, assumed that the natural state of humanity, its natural inclination, is selfish and directs towards destruction and war, which is prevented by the intervention of state mechanisms ensuring social peace. Additionally, Hardin attributes the constant growth, appearing as a project and practice in the era's socio-historical field, which wants people to maximize their wealth (and be calculative and creative economic entities), and indeed, it comes into direct conflict with a world where resources are limited, in a "hyper-historic substance" of human nature.

Elinor Ostrom, utilizing elements from history, anthropology, and sociology, demonstrated that Hardin's inherent logic in individuals, which inevitably leads to the tragedies of the commons is not the only one present.[21] More specifically, through an institutional approach to self-governance of Common Pool Resources (CPRs),[22] especially on small population scales (from 50 to 15,000), she showed that people experiment and invent many different ways of cooperative self-organization for managing commons beyond the state and the market.

The main problem in Hardin's example is that the herders do not communicate with each other and are unaware of the consequences of their actions. They are simply trapped in a closed system of thought and action. Hardin's example, like most examples of tragedies of the commons, game theory, and collective action problems, presupposes a closed system with certain players who have specific choices, and each player derives the maximum benefit when acting at the expense of the others, betraying the whole. Therefore, the intervention of an external authority (the state or the market) is required as *the only way* to avoid tragedies of the commons.[23]

However, reality shows that quite often—unfortunately, not always, and certainly more easily in small population scales—people communicate with each other and can derive maximum benefit, not only in economic terms but primarily in terms of environmental sustainability when they cooperate and self-organize. Based on these observations, Ostrom

[20] Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, London: Penguin, 2017 (1651).
[21] Something that anthropology had highlighted much earlier, see e.g. the work of Shallins, Clastres, Kropotkin, Graeber, etc.
[22] A Common Pool Resource is a type of commons that is quite difficult to exclude some people from accessing, such as a fishing ground, a pasture, etc.
[23] Elinor Ostrom, Governing the commons, 1990, Cambridge, p. 12.

formulated eight *design principles*[24] characterizing the institutions of CPR management that withstand the test of time:

> 1) Clearly defined boundaries of the CPR.
>
> 2) Congruence between appropriation and provision rules with local conditions. Appropriation rules should distribute benefits in proportion to each participant's contribution. Rules based on proportionality are more easily accepted as fair.
>
> 3) Collective-choice arrangements—most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules.
>
> 4) Monitoring—assessment of CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.
>
> 5) Graduated sanctions for those violating operational rules.
>
> 6) Conflict-resolution mechanisms—rapid access to low-cost local resolution of conflicts
>
> 7) Minimal recognition of rights to organize. The rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external government authorities.
>
> 8) Nested enterprises— appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized in multiple layers (CPRs that are parts of larger systems).[25]

These principles highlight "the close link between the reciprocity norm, democratic governance, and active participation in the production of a certain number of resources.[26] Therefore, Ostrom's study on natural or ecological commons shows that there can be a third way of managing CPRs or commons, beyond the state and the market, that does not lead to their destruction. Self-governance and collaborative management of commons (and the diversity that characterizes them) can thus serve as an example of another way out of the environmental crisis towards sustainable and regenerative paths. Of course, as Ostrom notes, these design principles are not exclusive, and there may be others that research and practice can reveal.

The institutional approach seems somewhat limited in its analysis, to some extent ignoring the broader socio-historical context within which commons and their conflicts arise

[24] *Ibid*, p. 51. According to Ostrom, "institutions can be defined as the sets of working rules that are used to determine who is eligible to make decisions in some arena, what actions are allowed or constrained, what aggregation rules will he used, what procedures must be followed, what information must or must not be provided, and what payoffs will be assigned to individuals dependent on their actions".
[25] *ibid*, p.90-101.
[26] Dardot- Laval, *ibid*.

with the modern state and the market.[27] It appears to perceive the community as something homogeneous and exclusive, rather than an open relation and pluralistic association of singularities.[28] Furthermore, significant elements are absent, such as an analysis of power relations and exploitation within the community that co-manages the common resource.[29]

However, beyond Ostrom's predominantly economic perspective, these forms of collective self-management of commons, operating beyond their appropriation by the market and the state, expand practices of sharing and can function as precursors to a new form of social (self)organization.[30]

IV. Commons: Within and Beyond Tragedies – An Example: Stagiates

The concept of commons is intertwined with that of enclosures, meaning privatizations. Marx described with these terms the "primitive accumulation" of capital, as the necessary starting point of the capitalist mode of production. The (primitive) accumulation of capital occurred through the violent enclosure of common lands, meaning their privatization, leading to the separation of laborers and means of production, resulting in wage labor, the migration of workers to urban centers, and their proletarianization.[31] The enclosures of the commons are followed by alienation and continuous proletarianization,[32] essentially constituting the continuous process of accumulation and a characteristic of capital's development.[33] However, beyond a process appropriation of commons, where access to areas or uses of products and resources is restricted or excluded, it is also a strategy that obstructs practices of sharing and their diffusion ("de-commoning").[34]

Thus, enclosures are often followed by struggles, such as those waged by environmental and other movements, and struggles for commons' preservation and creation, thus constituting ways and spaces of resistance to the dominance of alienated and commodified relationships, within which the terms of space and life are heteronomously determined.[35]

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[27]Kioupkiolis, A. *The Common and Counter-Hegemonic Politics, Re-thinking social change*, Edinburg Press, 2019, p.46.
[28] *Ibid*, p. 12-24.
[29] Dardot- Laval, *ibid*.
[30] Stavridis, S. *Common Space. The city as commons*. London: Zed Books, 2016, p. 52-54.
[31] Marx K*., The capital*, Vol.1., London: Penguin, 1990.
[32] "Enclosures were not the only way the primitive accumulation took place. There was also slavery (see Marx K., ibid.), the witch hunts (see Federici S., Caliban and the Witch) etc.
[33] De Angelis M., "Marx and primitive accumulation: The continuous character of capital's 'enclosures'", *The commoner*, 2 (1), 1-22, 2001.
[34] Stavridis, S., *ibid*, p.3.
[35] Henri Lefebvre, The rights to the city.

The concept of the commons refers to shared goods, whether material or immaterial, that are not subject to public-state or private-market ownership and use.[36] More specifically, commons can be interpreted as a fluid social relationship between a social group (and its present and potential aspects) and the social and natural environment considered essential for its life and survival.[37] Examples include CPRs, cases of commons that are difficult to exclude anyone from accessing, such as a pasture, a fishing ground, an irrigation source, or a forest.

More broadly, commons are formed and categorized as such when there is a relationship between a good (material or immaterial), a community of people, and a framework of rules and institutions for their collective self-management.[38] Therefore, commons are constructed through a social practice that establishes a social relationship between commoners, communing and a common good governed by certain rules. However, in the case of CPRs and various other examples of commons (digital commons like Wikipedia, common spaces like self-managed parks, etc.), this does not mean that the use and sharing of the resource or good are limited to the specific community collectively managing it. Once this relationship is established, commons can be organized as an open system, such as access to a source, not restricted to the individuals in the community self-managing it. The case of the Stagiates is characteristic of both resistance to enclosure and privatization, i.e., enclosures, and of the practice of collective self-management and sharing established by the communal use of commons.

Stagiates is a village with 75 residents at the foot of Mount Pelion, a few kilometers outside the city of Volos, in Thessaly, Greece. In 2014, the community's assembly declared itself responsible for managing the spring of Krya Vrysi (Cold Spring), including the reservoir, the source, and the network. They took on the cost of maintenance, regular chemical checks, and other tasks.[39] They have had control of the source keys since then. The main reason for

[36] The terms commons and common are often used interchangeably. A key distinction, which we will not go into too deeply in this article, is this: commons are all the different projects of collective governance, while the common is the principle that guides them towards a non-capitalist future. See Dardot-Laval, *ibid*.

[37] Hardt-Negri, Commonwealth, Harvad University Press, 2009.

[38] Kioupkiolis, *ibid.*p. 37.

[39] Most of the information about Stagiates was taken from an interview with Vangelis Galanopoulos, a resident of the village and a member of the community assembly and related self-management projects. The methodology of the interview followed the narrative approach where, narrator and listener/respondent collaborate, producing meanings and conclusions on the events and experiences described by the narrator. See, Riessmnan, C.K. (2004) «Narrative analysis». Στο Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods, edited by M.S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman , T. Futing Liao. London UK and Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications, p. 709.

self-management was the poorly maintained network and contaminated water they discovered through their own investigation.

In 2020, while the collective self-management of the source continues, the village is partially disconnected from the Cold Spring source by the central administration. Instead, it is supplied 80% of its water from another source in Portaria. The municipal authorities presented reasons related to the tragedy of the commons, citing water pollution and mismanagement by residents, but it was later revealed that the real plan was to privatize the source for exclusive use by a well-known beverage company. During the same period, there were three attempts, thwarted by the residents' mobilization, to cut off the water from the spring in the central square of the village. Thus, the self-management of the Cold Spring continues by the Stagiates community.

Simultaneously, the Stagiates community is involved in a second, larger, and possibly more comprehensive self-management project concerning the region's irrigation network. After a major administrative reform in Greece, where powers were transferred from local communities and villages to central municipalities, a broader privatization plan for water sources emerged. In response, the Stagiates, along with many other communities in the area, decided to self-manage the irrigation network comprehensively, from streams and sources to ditches. The source of Stagiates is inscribed in those commons that are resources of a common pool (natural or ecological commons), and at the same time, they are open access. At the core of the established practice lies the principle that the relationship between the community and the source is both egalitarian and collective in terms of participation in the decisions governing its use, and non-commodified in terms of the use itself.[40]

This conscious decision of the community highlights a significant dimension of the politics and self-management of resources, the commons (or the common), as the emergence of a new way of challenging late capitalism, aspiring to overcome it. Alongside this political practice (commoning), beyond the commons, a cultural background, education, and ideology in the broader sense are created, and through this practice, these elements emerge, and we can grasp community's social imaginary. Moreover, it cannot be considered coincidental that in 2020, the Municipality sealed two spaces used by the community (museum and school) as venues for cultural events with the aim of disseminating, among other things, discourse on de-growth, the commons, anti-racism, and anti-fascism.

[40] Harvey D., *Rebel cities,* London: Verso, 2012

Therefore, it is extremely important to view this example in the context of the recent environmental crisis experienced by the wider area of Volos and Pelion, with immeasurable damages from floods, leaving people without drinking water for days. A characteristic example was the assistance provided by the Stagiates community. During those days, they published the following texts on social networks:

> "The public springs of Stagiates continue to supply us with the water of Krya Vrysi. It flows pure and free, available to anyone in need during these difficult days. The road to the village is passable, but caution is advised!"
>
> Stagiates-Free Waters, September 8, 2023

> "The fellow citizens in Volos face a huge water supply problem, and we must show solidarity with all means at our disposal. We propose:
>
> Reconnecting our village to the source of Krya Vrysi, from which water was cut off for a large part of the village and is channeled unused into a nearby stream!
>
> Redirecting the drinking water from Portaria, which irrationally hydrates Stagiates, to Volos for the needs of our fellow citizens. Those with means of transportation can get water from the public village springs that transfer water from our source.
>
> Simultaneously, we transport water to areas of the city for basic hygiene needs.
>
> Water is a natural, common good. It is not a commodity."
>
> Stagiates-Free Waters, September 9, 2023

In addition to providing the residents of Volos with drinking water from Stagiates, the Stagiates community supported them by delivering water. The village guesthouse was also offered without charge "for people who want to bathe, clean up, take care of their personal hygiene". A month earlier, they assisted in firefighting efforts in the region using water tanks. Thus, practices of sharing and collective self-management extend to various activities.

The commons, as exemplified by the case of Stagiates, serve as an exercise in conscious politics and *collective self-governance, social justice, openness, sustainability*,[41] collaboration, and sharing. These elements are essential parts of any egalitarian and liberating movement and initiative that aims towards finding sustainable solutions to environmental issues.

In times of crises, tragedies involving the commons are constantly occurring, not solely due to the actions of isolated individuals who fail to communicate, but also due to the actions of businesses and their elevated role in the modern era, necessitating state care. Today,

[41] Kioupkiolis, *ibid*, p. 75.

beyond the disasters related to climate change—resulting in thousands of human lives lost, island submersions, refugee flows, and a massive social impact—another tragedy unfolds. This is related to the impact of business activities on the environment and local communities, without taking into account the opinions of local communities and those living in cities, forests, and mountains, as evidenced by environmental defense movements presented in this volume (Halkidiki, Agrafa, Western Macedonia, Volos, Canada).

In these circumstances, movements (whether environmental or others) and initiatives for the commons consciously resist enclosures and social alienation. They reject identifications with the dominant organization of normalcy, self-interest, and apathy, disrupting the cultural background of capitalist realism. They strive to weave bonds of solidarity and understanding in an extremely hostile, competitive, and individualistic environment. They reintegrate freedom into its social dimension, and through their existence, they invade history, consciously advocating for equality and space for the exercise of expression and freedom by all individuals, especially in the collective self-management of a common good and more broadly. [42]

The openness and pluralism of communities formed around movements and initiatives of commons, combined with the horizontal exercise of power, lead to spaces where equality meets freedom without the social drowning out the individual or the individual functioning destructively to the detriment of the whole. Moreover, they show that, in many cases, they spring pluralistic and diverse sustainable responses to the environmental crisis.

[42] This conscious action and practices show that we cannot see these projects and movements simply as vernacular (Illich), as David Bollier suggests (see Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Common, New Society Publishers, p. 34). Instead, they are fully integrated into the notion of politics as a collective activity that is conscious and challenges the existing institutions of society (Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy" in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy,* Oxford University Press, 1991).