Pluriversality and beyond: consolidating radical alternatives to (mal-)development as a Commonist project

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Abstract
This article addresses contradictions in the 'pluriverse' of radical alternatives to maldevelopment, and proposes an integrative framework for fostering productive convergences among its forces. It argues that the 2020s and 2030s will be pivotal decades, in which the current global conjuncture, characterized by intensifying economic turmoil, climate change, and ecological crises, will translate into increased mass discontent, global polarization, political instabilities, and social unrest across the world. However, there is no reason to believe that this intensification of crises will automatically result in the end of unproductive divisions among the global left. Thus, we argue that a higher level of proactivism, at a meta-ideological standing, which we refer to here as the ‘Commonist Project’, is both necessary and possible. The article proposes a fourfold framework of how to promote sustainable convergences and solidarities, going beyond temporary pragmatic coalitions and alliances. This proposal draws on the idea of ‘commoning transformative knowledge’, realized through creating new transversal integrative assemblages of alternative-futures-making initiatives. In the end, the argument is empirically supported by drawing on the authors’ critical reflections on their own cross-organizational experiences of fostering dialogic and praxis-based methodologies across various groups and forces pursuing post-capitalist alternatives through the People’s Sovereignty Network.

Keywords Pluriversality · Transversality · Commonism · Maldevelopment · People’s Sovereignty Network · Platform activism · Praxis-based methodologies

Interdependency of civilizational crises and civilizational solutions

The multiplicitous and multifaceted crises that our planet is experiencing today indicate an inherent civilizational failure (Gills 2020b). We are living through a “great implosion,” a “world system crisis,” a “general crisis” of our dominant form of civilization, a “great decline,” which even threatens us with the “collapse” of human civilization itself (Gills 2020a). A historically specific form of “civilization”, originating from European imperialism and colonialism and deeply entangled with capitalist modernity (Öcalan 2020; Rist 2019), has now gained global dominance. This world civilizational system is characterized by its foundational dependence on five elements: (1) capital replacing labor as the ultimate source of value; (2) carbon—fossil fuels or more generally global extractivism; (3) compulsive economic growth, through relentless commodification of...
socio-ecological relations and a continuing appropriation of the commons; (4) coloniality, i.e., the stratifying power relations and epistemes necessary for maintaining intersectional hierarchies; and finally (5) corruptive politics, energized by and serving the rise of monopoly-finance capital, corporate-state interest-driven advances in surveillance, datafication, bio- and neuro-technology, and warfare. We call the above 5Cs, the five intrinsic characterizers of today’s world civilization system (Hosseini 2020).

This system is inherently unstable, crisis-prone, and unsustainable. The 5Cs require an endless exploitative expansion into the human and non-human resources of the planet. None of the above five characterizers allows for the restoration of the capacities lost for protecting and sustaining life. Since we have already passed numerous critical thresholds of earth’s biocapacity (Rockström et al. 2015), and with no real short to medium-term technological solutions on the horizon, these same characteristics driving the ascendency of capitalist modernity and global capitalist civilization are now exactly the main contributors to its historical demise. Moreover, the incapacity of the system to sustain itself is now acting as an accelerator of divisions between the cores, peripheries, and semi-peripheries, resulting in even greater inequalities and tensions at both the national and international levels (Boatcă et al. 2017; Klein and Pettis 2020; Patomäki 2020).

The post-carbon policies and technological advancements advocated by the dominant elite, as far as they are developed chiefly to address the need for sustaining the present system by increasing its resilience and adaptability, will in practice only stretch the system’s dependence on the rest of the 5Cs, instead of ending it (Moriarty and Honnery 2011). New technologies that harness energy from renewable sources still face serious socio-political and economic obstacles (Dunlap and Brulle 2015); their rate of progression will most likely remain too low to avert extensive damage to humans and non-humans in the coming decades of this century (Gills and Morgan 2020; Hosseini 2020). More importantly, techno-fix solutions are being pursued by sections of the ruling class as a potential means of extending capital’s hegemony into the so-called green economy, leaving many populations, particularly in the global South, neglected and unprotected.

The underlying socio-economic and biopolitical structures on which the technological revolutions and policy reformation frameworks are based and to which they contribute must be profoundly challenged so that meaningful transitions can be owned and guided by the multitudes. This necessitates (1) de-carbonization, (2) de-capitalization, (3) de-growth, (4) decolonization, and (5) de-corrupting socio-political institutions through radical democracy, i.e., the 5Ds of a global struggle to save humanity from a catastrophic future and restore the regenerative power of the Earth System (Gills 2020b; Hosseini 2020).

The ‘radical interdependence’ of the 5Cs, in Escobar’s term (2018:101) requires nothing short of ‘mutually constituted’ responses in the realm of the 5Ds. Thus, if perceived as an adequate solution, any exclusive focus on only one or some of the Ds will function as a distraction from the rest of, equally if not more important, Ds. The historical inevitability of a deep civilizational shift is well understood by a growing number of 5D movements (Foran 2020). Despite their absolute necessity, the 5Ds—even if they are pursued together—will still be inadequate for a civilizational liberation to happen, since they are more recuperative than originative. The question of what kind of new civilizational forms, both at the local and global levels, should or would ultimately replace the currently failing ones signifies the urgency of promoting utopian visions based on profoundly different perceptions of civilization. Indeed, we need to ‘re-imagine civilization’ anew (Gills 2020a).

To be originative, the new movements need to address the major elements of what constitutes a self-sustaining civilization. There are of course many ways of conceptualizing these elements. Here, we suggest a simple model based on four elements or modalities we argue can provide us with a reconciliatory conceptual and dialogical framework for re-imagining ‘civilization’ in the time of the current deep civilizational crisis (cf. Hosseini 2021).

A civilization can be conceptualized and evaluated in terms of four modalities: (1) being and living; (2) willing and enabling; (3) learning and liaising; and (4) becoming and begetting.

1. **Mode of being and living** determines how a civilization (should) meet the essential requirements of “living well” for its human members, non-human living beings in their environmental settings, and future generations. Fundamental to this is the way the relationships between human beings (as both individual and collective beings) and their ecological networks, natural resources, and means of living (both productive and reproductive) are set up, and how re/production, re/distribution, recy-

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1 The ‘radical interdependence’ of the 5Cs demands the ‘mutually constituting’ of emancipatory praxes in the pluralistic realm of recuperative 5Ds, and the ‘structural entanglements’ of the four civilizational modalities (introduced later in this article) require integrative frameworks for co-creating originative alternatives. However, the radical interdependence and structural entanglements are an ontological feature (of a predominant complex world civilization system), whereas the mutual constituency and integrative frameworks are more of a praxiological imperative with profound normative, epistemological, and strategic implications for the emancipatory politics of alternatives (Read and Alexander 2019; see also Lang 2022; Loh and Shear 2022).
cling waste, consumption, exchange, and financing are socially organized and systematized to achieve a self-sustaining status.

2. Mode of willing and enabling determines how a civilization (should) autonomously make decisions, plan, and execute plans, participate, regulate, and evaluate social conduct, manage internal conflicts of interest, structure power relations within and between their communities, address inequalities, and face exogenous challenges.

3. Mode of liaising and learning determines the ways through which individuals, collectives, and institutions, in interaction with their natural environments, re-produce, share and communicate knowledge necessary for creating and sustaining socio-ecological harmonies in the context of a healthy (bio-cultural) diversity.

4. Mode of becoming and begetting determines how a civilization and its members (should) evolve out of and move beyond the prevailing socio-ecological structures and their established cultural settings, and how they mobilize resources, motivate social actors, overcome structural impediments, and respond to crises.

The currently globalized primary modes of being, willing, liaising, and learning, defined in capitalist terms of reference and interest, are not only unsustainable but dangerously destructive from a bio-civilizational perspective. Indeed, we live in a pathological system, based upon constant ecological and social destruction, which requires us to go beyond the recuperative “5Ds” into a more originate and imaginative realm, incubating seeds of radically different civilizations (Gills and Morgan 2020; Hosseini 2020).

In terms of being and living, planetary life is now seriously threatened, and in just a matter of a few decades, extinctions of both plant and animal species could accelerate dramatically (IPBES et al. 2019) due to the now global extractivist practices of capital and the rapid depletion of earth’s ecological capacity to sustain the global carbon fuel dependent civilization. Global heating and climate change, the ongoing 6th mass extinction of species, excessive (over) consumption, and continued extremes of pollution of land, air, and water, are among the major destructive trends. This is an unprecedented time in the history of humanity, in which the eco-biological bases of human civilization(s) and even human existence itself are now globally jeopardized (Wallace-Wells 2019; see also a collective statement by scientists on the danger of societal disruption and societal collapse, Weyhenmeyer et al. 2020).

In terms of willing and enabling, over the last few decades, the dominant political institutions, deeply captured and corrupted by private corporate power, have shown little willingness to effectively change the course of events and empower communities to address their main concerns effectu ally. On the contrary, recent political trends indicate that growing public disappointment with the ruling political and economic institutions is increasingly feeding into anger, phobias, discrimination, and violence (Diamond 2018). In terms of liaising and learning, unprecedented degrees of socio-economic inequalities, disparities, and deprivation have significantly damaged socio-ecological solidarities, and weakened social trust and cohesion as well as the prospect for global peace beyond global coloniality (Christiansen and Jensen 2019; see Oxfam report on global inequality Gneiting et al. 2020). Finally, in terms of becoming and begetting, most of the potential and the existing solutions developed within the compulsive growth-oriented frameworks of capitalist development (or even the global project of modernity) to address the crisis of being and living are proving to be highly ineffective and contradictory (Duara 2015; Moriarty and Honnery 2011; Sim 2010).

In response to the chronic failures of (mal-)development and the ineffective corporate-state-led solutions offered by dominant elites to today’s acute global challenges, there has been an explosion of self-motivated grassroots’ initiatives and transformative movements. These forces are pushing for more meaningful systemic transitions in a broad range of scopes, from the local to the global, and in a vast array of forms, from the ideological to the practical, and from issue-based to systemic change. In terms of strategy, the emerging landscape (or ecosystem) of alternatives comprises an expansive spectrum of approaches, from reformist to substitutionary to disjunctive. Concerning modes of solidarity, the landscape extends from efforts to transcend boundaries, to struggles to build pragmatic alliances, to self-entrenching and maximum autonomy (Gills et al. 2017).

This recent progress in the global landscape of radical alternatives is a source of hope, apart from negative feedback loops in the system like the current global pandemic, that may only temporarily slow down the pace of demise (Le Quéré et al. 2020) and embolden stronger demands for change (Askanius and Uldam 2020). However, most of these initiatives are unknown to the broader public and are neglected (or silenced) by the mainstream media and the reigning political and economic elite. Only recently, thanks to the pandemic-induced lockdowns and slowdowns, an unprecedented opportunity has emerged for these transformative forces to surface through online engagements with their broader populations. More importantly, this promising ecosystem itself is excessively dynamic, diverse, imaginative, and constantly evolving, adding to the complexities of potential social transitions that they herald.

Despite the richness of interactions between these new forces, and their strong transformative capacities, regrettably they are still a marginal theme, not only in academia and mainstream politics but even among many movement actors themselves. A number of totalizing notions (e.g., ‘pluriverse’, ‘multitude’, ‘commonwealth’, and ‘assembly’)
have, nevertheless, been invented in critical social sciences to capture the nature of this promising yet chaotic landscape of transformative alternatives (see Escobar 2018, 2020 for the concept of pluriverse; Hardt and Negri 2004, 2009, 2012, 2017 for the concepts of multitude, assembly, commonwealth, and the common). Important, albeit embryonic, efforts are being made by activist-academics to map the ecosystem and the number of impressive encyclopedic compilations on alternatives is increasing (Kothari et al. 2019; Parker et al. 2007; Shantz and Macdonald 2013; Speth and Courrier 2020).

Most of these novel notions are descriptive, and to some extent celebratory, yet too often failing to sufficiently outline concrete solutions to what they all acknowledge to be the “grand challenge” or dilemma. The authors of Pluriverse (Kothari et al. 2019: xxyv) articulate the challenge as such: ‘Given the diversity of imaginative visions across the globe, the question of how to build synergies among them remains open. … Differences, tensions, even contradictions, will exist, but these can become a basis for constructive exchange[s].’ In Wendy Harcourt’s words (2014:1325): ‘The challenge for the future is to build a broad platform for living economies or alternatives building up from community needs, which are inter-generational and gender-aware, based on an ethics of care for the environment.’ The next section discusses the dilemma in more detail.

### The supreme dilemma of the transformative pluriverse

One of the greatest if not the greatest dilemma the progressive pluriverse faces in today’s context (where systemic crises threaten human civilization and thus necessitate comprehensive radical responses), resides in the lack of common ideological structure and effective global coordination to challenge and change the world capitalist system. This dilemma is not new and has roots in a long history of clashes between dominant forces leading capitalist development and radical alternative and counter-hegemonic social movements. Internal contradictions between centralist and decentralist tendencies within pluriversal politics are another long-term historical characteristic. The problem of duality of unity vs. diversity is perhaps the most common problem for many social movements, of any scope and scale (Hosseini 2006).

Historically, authoritarian movements on the left and the right have shown a greater capacity to overcome this dilemma in favor of an imposed unity, acting against diversity, e.g., through suppression of internal dissent, brainwashing, consent-manufacturing, cultivating nostalgic sentiment, forging fake and fixed historical identities, skillful political propaganda, in-group homogenization, and outgroup othering, and through charismatic leadership (Wimberley 2018; Wodak 2020a, b). Quite strangely, even though we can find many divisions inside the authoritarian field, the new populist radical right has been able to orchestrate a synchronous comeback in many societies across the world, from the West to the East (Hosseini et al. 2022; Moghadam 2020). While the right-wing populist movements are animated by ethnocentric, xenophobic, monocultural, and exclusionist ideologies, and thus might ostensibly have reasons to abhor each other, the level of cohesion and mutual support among them is seemingly stronger than what we may find among the disparate progressive movements of the left, who pursue much more open-minded and multicultural values. The radical right has now extended its influence very deeply into the heartlands of the remaining working classes of the world, especially in the deindustrialized regions of the most developed societies (Houtman et al. 2017; Judis 2016).

History has shown us repeatedly, and especially more recently, that desperate, distressed, and disadvantaged populations tend to favor their immediate existential needs over their longings for higher values like liberty, equality, autonomy, and plurality. When their socio-ecological existence is perceived to be under serious threat, many choose immediate and “simple” answers (Hosseini et al. 2022). This vulnerability is well understood by demagogues of all strands, who are all too often capable of capitalizing on popular fears. This arena of appeal to the popular will seems to be underplayed by progressive forces of change, whose limited energy is most often spent on internal mobilizing to realize their isolated agendas.

The transformative pluriverse, especially in the post-Soviet global context, has been deeply affected by the failures of the past century’s communist experiment. One main reason for the historical failure of the so-called “actually existing socialism” was its devolution into an often-monstrous state-centric machinery of mass oppression, though deploying “progressive” universalist meta-narratives. In response, the new left of the second half of the last century strongly embraced diversity as a new core value. The new left of the 60s had already started to move in this direction even before the collapse of Communism, replacing ideology politics with identity politics, materialist values with post-materialist ones, the economic with the cultural, the global with the local, and redistribution with recognition, while gradually moving away from their working-class backing. They absorbed the post-modern logic of the post-industrial society, thus making themselves unprepared for the time which decades of neoliberalism and globalization brought into being, a period of growing social inequality, the rising gig economy, endemic economic crisis, and brutal austerity policies, leading to the diminishment of both the working and the middle classes.
The new left found its strength in “celebrating” diversity and pluralism; a common feature that still characterizes their version of the pluriverse even decades after the decline of the welfare states in the West, the downfall of communist regimes in the East, and the neoliberal dismantling of state-led developmentalism in much of the Global South. There is now a multitude of context-specific movements with loose or diffuse ideological underpinnings but strong commitments to plurality and mutual recognition. This feature distinguishes them profoundly from the dominant universalist regime promoted and imposed by capital.

However, once again, history has begun a new course: one that brings to the foreground the old dilemma of unity vs. diversity, now fast moving back into the center of pluriversal politics. The rapid compression of space–time and augmentation of the scales of impact poses serious challenges to the political economy and political ecology of pluriversality (Sklair 2021). The severity of cascading and interacting socio-economic and bio-ecological crises, and the urgency of responding decisively within a short historical temporal window and on the large scale necessary to deal effectively with such crises, now appear to make it untenable for the left to continue celebrating diversity if that means a continued lack of common goals and coordinating structure (Chomsky and Pollin 2020). Mottoes like “to agree to disagree” in the current conditions of looming catastrophic changes and rising rebellions, now appear as a fancical idea that the broad global left may no longer be able to afford to hold onto, given the imperative for common ground and common action. Pluriversalism, however, seems to be investing its hope on the magic of interactions around common goals and causes and mutual learning, but also on collective actions for strategizing advocacy and action, and building collaborative initiatives (Kothari et al. 2019).

The 2020s–2030s will be recorded as the most pivotal decades in the most critical century in human history, where “demanding the impossible” becomes the only “realistic” option for emerging radical and revolutionary forces. The current conjuncture, characterized by intensifying economic and eco-biological crises, will most likely translate into unprecedented social discontent in the coming years (Chase-Dunn 2020; Foran 2020). The question of scale (Sklair 2021), and the dilemma of the colossality of the entrapping gravity of a world civilization system inherently characterized by the interdependent 5Cs, require stronger responses beyond but not exclusive of ‘global tapestry’ making (Hosseini et al. 2020; Kothari 2020). A widespread craving for experiencing new ways of cross-ideological integrity and traversing divisions is becoming increasingly apparent (Hosseini 2015a, b; Hosseini et al. 2017).

**A metamorphosis of pluriverse into metaverse?**

Being so different from their original cells, the new imaginal cells of an emerging butterfly within a cocoon are attacked as alien entities by the residual immune system of the fading caterpillar. The surviving new cells, however, find and recognize each other as part of a new project and then start to synergistically form clusters that finally grow into a whole new organism (Kawano 2018). Numerous post-capital(ist) ideas and practices are now emerging and rapidly growing across the world, but too often still mostly in relative isolation from one another. The organizational bonds between these diverse projects are not going to grow naturally unless integrative plans are designed and implemented. Internationalism is once again being widely discussed around the planet by numerous forces of resistance, but as yet what is happening is a plethora of separate projects of internationalism emerging in parallel, while still being unable to find a single “vehicle” to unite them (Gills and Chase-Dunn 2021).

Disappointed by unresponsive political systems, many people have started to seek collective and independent solutions to their problems. While these practices may help some populations to survive or achieve some resilience, they fail to amount to holistic change beyond the social dominance of capital. As far as these initiatives fail to pose serious challenges to the foundations of capitalism, ironically and surely unintentionally, they may help the ruling political-economic establishment to continue to evade the responsibility for genuinely protecting communities and their environments (Wright 2018). There are many such examples, for instance, the cooptation by the State of indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon, with promises of collective well-being through the de facto promotion of neo-extractivist developmentalism (see also Burbach et al. 2013; Svampa 2019; Tilzey 2019; Veltmeyer and Petras 2014; Walsh 2010).

The key question is how to co-develop an inclusive and dynamic knowledge of the pluriverse of transformative alternatives and to make this knowledge a historical force that actively empowers and synergizes myriad transformational actors and strengthens their practices. Surely, there is already an abundance of transformative practices, utopian visions, and progressive transition theories. But the popular expectation that out of the marketplace of interactions between countless forms of post-capital alterity, somehow, magically, a new paradigm will arise that eventually ends the supreme rule of capital before it ends organized life, ironically resembles the core neoliberal myth of “the invisible hand” and the “trickle-down” fairy-tale.

The pluriverse of alternatives is a fertile breeding ground for myriad possibilities of reform and transformation; an advantage that is, however, also a disadvantage. The grand
mission in the present conjuncture should, therefore, be to harmonize this abundance of contrary initiatives and generate coordination among the plethora of self-assertive progressive forces. The prime task is thus to integrate divergent ingenuities and restructure the profusion of parallel but rival progressive voices around a set of shared principles, common values, and, eventually, common plans of coordinated action.

Indeed, those numerous ambitious and “utopian” visions that now aspire to design fully-fledged systemic replacement (“system change”) or formulate new universal principles, may run the risk of manufacturing a dominant ideology, thus leaving no room for genuine creativity and autonomous agency. However, many of the existing initiatives that are currently branded as ‘post-capital(ist)’, ‘new economy’, ‘next system’ or “great transition” are arguably forms of partial alterity to capitalism, rather than actual fully-fledged systemic replacements.

Attempts to move beyond the supremacy of capital are still too varied, in an era of mounting socio-economic and ecological anxieties. This in itself requires nothing short of decisive and courageous attempts at harmonizing ideas and practices to deal with these increasingly complex crises. The trillion-dollar question that movements in the pluriverse of alternatives face today is how to create transformative and sustainable alliances across multiple differences that would result in an inclusive movement for (global) civilizational change.

The answer to this question cannot be dictated from above or the outside. It first needs to be developed by empirically exploring the solidaristic moments and alliance-making attempts among the old and newly emerging alternatives, and by examining the causes of their successes and failures (see Schöneberg et al. 2022; Clarence-Smith and Monticelli 2022). The promotion of self-reflexivity and open-mindedness is crucial here, which can be achieved by inquiring about the sources of unproductive frictions among these forces and the ways through which disagreements can be converted into a base for constructive exchanges. But it cannot stay there.

There are many local and communal models of collective decision making and coalition building, such as circular, deliberative, cooperative, participatory, and conciliarist democracies, that have shown promising features for such a purpose (see Franzen in 2022; Morris 2022; Naylor 2022). However, these practices are mostly limited to the groups that already strongly share values, especially those that underpin their favored model of coalition building. A possibly more promising base for overcoming the dilemma of unity vs. diversity (without sacrificing one aspect for the other) comes from the idea of the Commons or Commoning especially when it is placed at the core of a new inter-societal (e.g., internationalist, but also inter-communal) bio-civilizational project.

### Commoning the alternatives from within: overcoming the dilemma

The extended idea of commons (beyond physical) as praxis shows a promising transformative potentiality to dynamically and democratically enable many post-capitalist movements to overcome the persistent dilemmas of plurality vs. universality, diversity vs. cohesion, and fluidity vs. solidarity. An inclusive comprehension of the inner nature, deep structure, and conflictual dynamism of capitalism is potentially a cognitive “common”. To achieve a transformative understanding of existing post-capitalist praxes and visions of utopian futures requires cumulative, collective, and cooperative learning. Thus, efforts at such intellectual-activist theories of capital, of change, and of the post-capital utopias can be generated and treated as being a commons.

There are many things that we can learn from the commons paradigm for this process of commoning post-capital alternatives. However, the commons paradigm itself suffers from several limitations when it is seen as a potential core for integrating alternatives. A conceptual transition is, therefore, needed, from perceiving the commons and commoning as potentially transformative alternative practices, resources, or spaces, to creating the institutional bases for integrating the alternatives into metamorphic projects for the comprehensive transformation of societies beyond capitalist relations and their imperatives.

Although there is no single universal line of historical progress beyond the hegemony of capital, we argue that it is possible to create integral frameworks of praxis, intended for orchestrating common actions across different alternative praxes. This becomes a strong possibility if our knowledge of the existing or imminent transformative experiences is liberated from the disintegrating forces of capital, legacies of coloniality, and the persisting residues of identitarianism. Co-creating transformative agendas in collaboration with communities of struggle is, therefore, vital needed today, to generate educational Commons as a means for establishing organic unities among alternative praxes (see Maldonado-Villalpando et al. 2022).

The political goal should be to go beyond localized fragmented radical struggles, without reducing their multifor- mity, to challenge the totalizing effects of the capitalist markets and states. The process of building organic unities, or what we may call ‘commoning the alternatives’ should intimately involve ‘organic activist-intellectuals.’ One role these organic activist-intellectuals should play is to help post-capitalist initiatives self-reflectively explore and address their limitations, the risks of regenerating discriminative power
relations, and ideological sectarianism through their practices. Therefore, commoning the transformative knowledge and experiences of alternatives is a self-rectifying endeavor that translates assortments into collective learning processes, through which each movement becomes capable of traversing (rather than transcending) their self-inflicted ideological boundaries and thereby of developing integral macro-political projects to transcend capitalism (Gills et al. 2017; Hosseini 2013; Hosseini 2015a, b; Hosseini et al. 2017; Shantz 2013). This constitutes a ‘Commonist project’ (cf. Hosseini 2021).

Drawing on our four-dimensional framework for re-imagining civilization, the Commonist project as a metamorphic shift in the pluriverse is about developing: (1) self-sufficient modes of livelihood/subsistence (being and living) independent from the detrimental forces of private capital and plutocracies, based on egalitarian self-sustaining socio-ecological systems of redistribution and re/production that promote ‘well-living’. Scale is a central matter when it comes to autonomous eco-sufficiency. As in most cases, self-sufficiency is impossible at the local level due to the limitation of resources and the complexity of modern life, hence ‘radical interdependency’ across autonomous place-based initiatives becomes vital (cf. Salleh 2009); (2) co-determining modes of governance (willing and enabling) that effectively translate internal conflicts and divisive disparities in decision making into cohesive solidarities, consensus-building processes, and collective will-to-freedom. To achieve this, it is central to normatively conceptualize the state and the market as commons, i.e., entities that need to be re-commoned. This way, there will be less space for conflict over the scale of democracy; (3) transversal modes of sociality (liaising and learning) capable of producing cooperative solidarities and egalitarian systems of mutual recognition and knowledge-making across identities and ideologies. New notions of commons have already started to be extended into the realms of the social, cultural, and technological; and (4) transformative modes of praxis (becoming and begetting) to de-commodify social relations, and to co-strategize political actions of large scale, intentionally planned for paving the way for the realization of place-based (particularistic) projects, and thereby co-realizing post-capitalist utopian visions (see Hosseini 2021).

Thus, to common our knowledge of the various alternatives, we need to start with examining their capacities with respect to each one of the above four components of Commonism as a civilization-building project. Out of such systematic examinations, investigative frameworks can be drawn to explore ways of overcoming limitations and actualizing potentials to pave the way for the emergence of dynamic originative projects. One active example of such initiatives is the Alternative Futures Research Hub at the University of Newcastle, co-created by a network of activists and academics in Australia.

It is through promoting the self-awareness of their endogenous limitations among the agents of every form of alterity, and by improving their mindfulness of the liberating capacities in the vast array of other initiatives, that we may be able to overcome the dilemma of unity vs. diversity. None of the existing forms of alterity demonstrate adequate potency in themselves to become a mainstream tendency. They, however, do strive on the path of actualizing their potential creativities and their purposes. The actualization of potentialities in and by each transformative movement requires the movement actors to overcome their fear of self-criticism/self-reflection and engagement in critical interchanges with contrasting visions rather than seeking refuge in their tribal comfort. If alterity means to radically transform the status quo for the better, it will then become important to survey the relationship between the existing and emerging modes of alterity and the dominant order they aim to transform. The restless search for novelty after novelty, as Nietzsche once warned, must not blind us to the fact that past traditions—most notably the residues of colonialist and Eurocentric epistemologies—continue to live on and affect our present endeavors, and thereby prevent us from realizing that we might be reproducing past mistakes. Active exploration and critical examination of the histories of resistance and revolution must, therefore, be part of the Commonist project of building radical futures.

There is a growing tendency among the intellectual accounts of the commons (Euler 2018) to believe there is more to it than simply a common-property resource, either material or abstract. As Bollier (2015: 2) states, the commons ‘is less a noun than a verb because it is primarily about the social practices of commoning—acts of mutual support, conflict, negotiation, communication and experimentation that are needed to create systems to manage shared resources.’ Just like the Marxian notion of capital as a social process, the commons should also be considered as a social process, through which the political practice of commoning is organized and ultimately institutionalized. To highlight the social-relational aspect of the commons is also to raise the question of governance, ethics, responsibility, rights, and the rules of togetherness (Ostrom 2015). This idea has significant implications for projects that seek to create common platforms for integration among post-capitalist progressive forces. However, even this widened notion of commoning still limits our scope to the governance of shared resources and ignores the possibility of extending our thinking into sectors or areas that are portrayed as ‘non-commons’, particularly the state and the market. The latter two are normally
separated from the commons, whereas we can strongly argue that the state and market both have significant elements of commoning if they are seen as what they actually are and morally ought to be, i.e., as social institutions that create ecosystems for the public political and economic lives of nations in all the four dimensions.

Commoning is a process that promotes rules, norms, cultures, ethics, and the legal mechanism that enables the commoners to commonly reproduce, govern, redistribute, and share the stewardship and use of their resources. If we apply this definition to the realms of the state and market, we can then argue that both realms are required to be treated and structured as commons. Thus, any attempt to further democratize politics and extend democracy to the economy is a step forward towards reclaiming the state and the market as commons.

The idea that the economy belongs to the civic sphere can be traced back to the time of antiquity (Aristotle). Money is a means to facilitate transactions (Galbraith 2018). Its credibility relies on social trust, as well as the collective wealth and productivity of populations. The way the flow of money is directed in a society affects the interactions between individuals, communities, nature, and future generations. Therefore, although money can be owned privately, its social function as a commons, and therefore, its flow, total volume, and value should be determined as democratically/commonly as possible.

Public institutions, organizations, and corporations heavily rely on a broad range of commons, from natural resources to tax revenues to the collaboration between skillful individuals who attain their skills and knowledge by drawing on the commonly produced and shared sources of information. It is practically impossible for self-reliant communal projects to transcend beyond their interstitial relations with capital, if on the one hand, the state, international regimes of governance, and economic regulation are left unaltered, as the context of the conditioning environment. A meaningful structural reform in the state and market towards the realization of a post-capital future will not be possible without the active participation of communities with some degree of self-rule and self-reliance. As an example, the social organization characteristic of the Rojava commune in North Syria is founded upon the principle of Commonism, beginning at street level, through village, commune, and confederation levels, with autonomy and inclusive participation, with gender equality and women’s liberation intrinsic to all levels (Knapp et al. 2016; Rasit and Kolokotronis 2020; see also Piccardi and Barca 2022). This structure paves the way for radically altering the context of the state and the market if parallel struggles are made at the macro level. Commonism, therefore, is a project to create the commoning spaces where integral models of transforming the state, the community, the more-than-human ecology, and the economy are all developed, and strategies to implement these radical models are defined and implemented.

In our view, Commonism is an organizing civilizational project, one that creates common platforms for collaborative learning across multiple post-capital projects, generates critical self-reflection on endogenous limitations through interaction with contrasting or oppositional perspectives and facilitates transcending their internal limitations and external structural impediments through intentionally designed synergistic processes and projects.

The ultimate Commonist purpose is thus to help activists and whole societies to gain the needed insights, incentives, technics, and resources necessary for the fulfillment of their own ideals in inclusive, autonomous, and democratically determined ways. A precondition to this, however, is to help define a number of overriding objectives, like “the common good” and the meaning of “well-living,” that can facilitate consensus building, productive compromises, and fruitful collaborations across many initial differences (Hosseini 2018). Integration among alternatives should not become the goal per se. This integration needs to be purpose driven. Mapping alternatives based on the above fourfold framework of re-imagining civilization will help their proponents to recognize their status relative to other alternatives, and understand the core values, ideals, and assumptions that they share.

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2 Francis Bacon once famously wrote that ‘Money is like muck, not good except it be spread’ (Bacon and Scott 1908:67), and in 1625 added, ‘When it lay, upon a heap, it gave but a stench, and ill odour; but when it was spread upon the ground, then it was the cause of much fruit.’ (Bacon 2011).

3 Rojava is a de facto name used to refer to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in northeastern Syria. The multiethnic territory gained its self-proclaimed autonomy in 2012 in the context of post 2011 Syrian civil uprisings and conflicts. Kurdish movements in this region worked towards establishing a democratic confederation based on a constitution inspired by anarchistic, feminist, and libertarian socialist values, as well as the ideas of sustainability, social ecology and multi-religious pluralism, and cultural diversity (see Radpey 2021).

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Case study: critical reflections on the People’s Sovereignty Network

Recent years have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of synergistic and proactivist projects in many forms, from cross-ideological dialogical projects (e.g., World Social Forum of Transformative Economies, Global Dialogue for Systemic Change), to building collaborative actions across diverse collective praxes (e.g., The International League of Peoples’ Struggle, Global Tapestry of Alternatives, People’s Sovereignty Network, The Next System Project), to
co-constructing integrative theories and knowledge production platforms (e.g., Ecoversities, Democracy Collaborative), to consolidating transversal solidarities for political actions and policy transformation (e.g., Progressive International, The New Economy Coalition). The Commonist framework can be used to analyze and evaluate and thus map and locate these struggles in terms of their capacities and shortcomings for contributing to the liberating civilizational shifts.

This section, to pilot the framework, briefly discusses the People’s Sovereignty Network (PSN) in terms of the key aspects of the Commonist project and its four defining characteristics. The aim is not to showcase PSN as a perfect example or discuss its concrete achievements or evaluating how successful, strong or important the initiative has been in bringing about a civilizational change. Rather, the initiative is discussed here as an illustrative process, and thus its adherence to its core principles is critically assessed to explore its capacities for playing a metamorphosing role in the pluriverse.

The origins of the network rest in organic interactions between a variety of place-based social movements, civil society and political activists in the Global South, and a group of critical activist scholars mainly based in the Global North, of which one of the authors of this paper, Barry Gills, was a founding member. These forces combined around a set of common perceptions of challenges, common values and common aspirations of struggle, and the will to confront growing authoritarianisms, deepening neoliberal economic globalization, and global extractivisms.

The idea emerged that a network of South–South/ South–North solidarity could be created, dedicated to challenging the dominant contemporary state and capitalist system and to strive to achieve what the group came to call “people’s sovereignty” (in contradistinction to state sovereignty or capitalist market authority) (cf. McKeon and Berron 2020).

The network was perceived as being above all a process, one of collective dialogue, between place-based struggles to defend rights and territories, thus moving beyond fragmented struggles towards a common vision, to build future emancipation, justice, and a new ecological society. The network consciously set out to share analyses to generate common understandings of global patterns and trends and to bring the participants together to plan transformative action by building shared spaces of knowledge, alliance, campaigns, and solidarities. A founding principle of the PSN was that priority was to be given to the voices of the place-based activists, and the role of academics was more to listen to these analyses and to participate in an active co-construction of knowledge reflecting real experiences of struggles from the diverse sources of experience of those activists coming into the dialogue. There was an agreed aspiration to conduct the process via praxis-based dialogic methodologies.

The participants in the PSN have come together from across the globe, encompassing the Americas (including indigenous peoples), Africa, Europe, The Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia. The network was launched in a collective dialogic experience convened in Siena, Italy in November 2018. One of the most memorable aspects of that gathering was the strong sense of unity that pervaded the atmosphere over the several days of the process, a collective experience marked by a common spirit of sharing knowledge together based on mutual respect, listening, and open equality between all participants. The original PSN meeting in Siena sought to be the foundation of a close relationship to be developed over time. The group was diverse, with most participants coming from activist organizations in the Global South, from several continents. The themes addressed embodied a commitment to transversality, and the Commonist aim to generate an ‘educational commons’ as a means of establishing organic entities among alternative praxes, to co-create transformative agendas in collaboration with communities of struggle. The founding meeting was a bonding experience, and it led directly to the continuation of the dialogue, and soon after much inclusive network discussion and working sessions led to the creation of the People’s Sovereignty web lab (https://peoples-sovereignty-lab.org/), built on the idea of uniting a “mosaic” of struggles into a community, and joint authorship of a set of articles, reflecting the praxis-based dialogic methodology (McKeon and Berron 2020).

This ongoing PSN process, and the web lab, still under active co-constructed, embodies what Wendy Harcourt indicated (2014: 1325), i.e., to meet the challenge of the future, we need to create a broad platform for alternatives and living economies, building up from community needs, and that is inter-generational, gender-aware, and respectful of an ethics of care for the environment. Self-critical evaluation of the experience of the PSN has been a persisting practice of the network. The PSN recently organized a Festival of Ideas in three sequential online webinars, featuring youth activists, but inclusive of the range of movements now constituting the network. The focus was on discussion of the meaning of ‘people’s sovereignty’, and the experiences of struggle by the movements on the ground and the lessons derived from these experiences.

In terms of evaluating the experience of the PSN in relation to the four main aspects of the Commonist project (outlined above), the achievements are varied.

While the members of the network all actively aspire to develop new modes of being and living, beyond Capital, the actual realization of living economies is less evident. The realization in practice of the aspirations of willing and enabling is strong, however, with a continuous self-reflective
process of the co-termination of the mode of governance, moving towards cohesive solidarities and consensus-building processes. The practical tasks of perpetual organizational planning reflect a common problem arising in organizations: i.e., that a smaller group that have committed themselves to collective discussions on planning activities and to ongoing discussions about the structure and future evolution of the network tends to carry the process onward, but while also organizing network-wide dialogic meetings.

The transversal mode of solidarity, regarding liaising and learning, has been and remains a central feature of the PSN from its outset to the present. Mutual recognition of diverse knowledges across identities, ideologies, and modes of struggle, is intrinsic to the process (cf. Anderson and Settee 2020; Kothari 2020). The PSN is committed to the co-construction of knowledge, generated by and capable of productive cooperative solidarities among the diverse participants. Academics assist this process but do not dominate or overly determine its form and content (cf. Ferrando et al. 2020). More active synthesis of the knowledge emanating from the place-based social movement activists is still an area that can be strengthened and move the PSN beyond “symbolic solidarity” to a common struggle. Finally, transformative modes of praxis (becoming and begetting) via a collective process of co-strategizing political action, has been present in the network since the initial gathering in Siena, but yet remains an area that presents challenges of how to concretely link place-based struggles and realize post-capitalist utopian projects (cf. Clapp and Purugganan 2020).

The four modalities of the Commonist project are all present within and continue to inspire and animate the PSN, even when not explicitly referenced by the participants. The fuller realization of the potentialities of the core ideas of Commonism is in our experience a central aspect of the PSN experience, but requires constant collective critical self-reflection, and a will to listen and learn, and to renew the commitment to the common vision of a world transformed.

Conclusion

Commoning the post-capital alternatives is not simply about creating common-pool resources of data, information, and knowledge. Alternatives appear as not just ideas and imaginations but also lived experiences, creative works, and social practices. The aim should then be to make these experiences and ideas more visible and related by exploring their underlying principles. A civilizational shift becomes more likely when a full spectrum of noncontradictory principles is realized and used to encourage convergence. Commonist projects like those of PSN lab and Rojava grassroots’ experimentations, at all levels from local to international, and in different contexts, have been set up to co-create integrative projects by the intellectuals, activists, freedom-fighters, laborers, practitioners, and policy experts participating. Technics for enacting constructive conversation, consensus building, and overcoming latent discriminations need to be developed and employed. These all require meta-ideological and meta-identity commitments to ‘pluriversality’ and ‘transversality’ (Gills et al. 2017; Salleh et al. 2015). Developing the know-how of how to actively establish and empower self-sustaining, self-determining communal economies, in complementary and harmonious alliances with one another, is surely a central element of such projects. However, even more crucial is the operationalization of integrative frameworks developed to reflect the radical interdependence and structural entanglements of our failing world civilization system. Re-imagineering civilization, in more-than-human terms, can be a powerful transformative means for forming sustainable synergies beyond transitory alliances.

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