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Carlo Vercellone

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Managing the Knowledge Commons: Interview with Carlo Vercellone

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Interview with Dr. Carlo Vercellone, one of the leading theorists of cognitive capitalism and economist at the CNRS Lab of [The Sorbonne Economic Centre](#) (Centre d'Economie de la Sorbonne, CES).

feedback your research: “[Theoretical Framework on future knowledge-based economy](#)”, you describe the concept of the Common as a new form of economic and social organisation. How can we manage collective knowledge, resources and digital infrastructures in the new economy?

There is a close relationship between the first D-CENT report we wrote “[Theoretical Framework on future knowledge-based economy](#)” which is dedicated to the analysis of the knowledge economy and the second report “[Managing the commons in the knowledge economy](#)” which presents our reflections on the management of the common in relation to the development of alternative currencies.



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The key points of the analysis presented in the two reports can be summarised as follows. Firstly we have developed a reading of the new capitalism based on a fundamental distinction between two levels of analysis, which are often confused in contemporary studies. More specifically, the new capitalism, which I call here “**cognitive capitalism**”, cannot simply be identified as a variant of what, since the European Lisbon strategy, goes by the name of knowledge economy. Cognitive capitalism and knowledge-based economy are two distinct concepts that coexist and often contradict each other. The knowledge-based economy stands for a new phase of development of material, immaterial and intellectual intelligence in society. Cognitive capitalism can be defined as a new stage that follows industrial capitalism, whereby the central stake of value extraction and accumulation leads to

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furthermore control and privatization of the collective production of knowledge and transforms it in capital of a fictitious good (in the sense of Karl Marx). In this context, the accumulation of capital builds upon a strengthening of the intellectual property rights and consequently drives revenue mechanisms that render artificially rare certain resources that would otherwise be abundant, such as knowledge and information.

The development of the commons is comprised of three principal and strictly interrelated forms, which I believe can be identified in the concrete experiments we are developing with D-CENT:

- The development of intensive knowledge communities mostly related to activities linked to the informational revolution, as with the exemplary model of the free software and the



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copyleft. Moreover, the copyleft model nowadays extends also to the material production, for example in the case of the makers and 3D printers.

- The “production of man for man” in the case of health and education, both through the development of the social and collaborative economy and through bottom-up experiments of re-appropriation of institutions of the welfare state through democratic participatory mechanisms.
- The management of ecological resources which goes hand in hand with the rediscovery of a central role played by traditional forms of knowledge, which are not simple residues of the past but key elements for the development of a knowledge based society emancipated from the more predatory forms of regulation dictated by cognitive and neoliberal capitalism.

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your theorization of the Common there is a re-interpretation of the political economic theories that have categorised common goods only on the basis of goods which by virtue of their nature cannot fall under the categories of public or private. What are the limits to this model and how does the Common in the singular relate to the notions of commons and common goods?

The previously explained dynamics stand to show the vast and diversified spectrum of activities involved in the logic of the Common. The economic theories of public and common goods (theorised from Samuelson to Ostrom herself) establish precise technical and natural frontiers between respectively the logic of the public and that of the state, the





private and the market and the common, according to the intrinsic characteristics of the different goods. In such way we obtain a sort of overturned pyramid of the different goods, where the vast majority are private goods, produced by the logic of the market and defined in the language of economics by being at the same time rivals and price excludable. We would then have the classic public goods, which are non rivals and non price excludable. The state would have to be taken in charge by the state. Lastly, according to Ostrom, we would have the common goods, defined by being essentially rivals but unlikely price excludable.

The primary limit to these theories in terms of a prescriptive political economy, both on a theoretical and empirical level, is that they consider the economic frontiers, which delimit the perimeters of the public, private and common to be determined almost eternal. In this perspective, the common would only be considered as an 'enclave', that is to say a third minor term standing amid the dialectic between state and market, without however notching their hegemonic role in the functioning of the economy. It would simply be another failure of the market. In this context we situate the approach of the Common in the singular.

To this theoretical setting the approach of the Common in the singular opposes three central points:

- The dynamic of the Common touches on such a vast spectrum of activities, which make it impossible to demarcate it in terms of the natural characteristics of the goods (rivalry or excludability).

- It is only the collective cooperation and deliberation that can elect certain goods to the statute of common goods, according not to the intrinsic characteristics of these goods but to social objectives of production. In this sense the common re-introduces democracy in the choices of production.
- The Common is characterised by forms of property, which are opposed to the principal of private and exclusive property. Therefore the common established the concept of *inappropriability* and guarantees a democratic accessibility.



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CENT is pioneering bottom-up democratic experiments in Spain, Iceland and Finland. What are some key elements of these experiments that are defining alternative models of management of the commons in a democratic way?

The concept of the common, has the potential of becoming dominant. Once we have taken into account the fact that, even if the common were to become a dominant model, forms of organizations based on the private sector and the market on the one hand and on the public sector and the state on the other, would not disappear. Therefore we need to think of a way to put in place a new hierarchical articulation between the principles of common, public and private. In the sense that the principles



of the common in their radical and participatory democratic dimension can contaminate the public and the private sphere and give rise to hybrid forms. Let me give two examples:

1. A democratization of institutions of the welfare state according to the principles of the common. Here the concept of co-production is essential in that it accepts the possibility for bureaucratic institutions of the welfare state to become the object of a democratic re-appropriation, based on forms of self-management, by those who would normally be considered as users.
2. The same goes for bottom-up democratic experiments in local public administration, all those forms of deliberation that extend participation in the management processes.

For example in the case of the [labsus network](#) in Italy or in the [borough of Chieri](#). The borough of Chieri has assigned to its citizens a number of rights of use and property.

The D-CENT project fits perfectly well in this context by providing theoretical and practical tools to enhance processes of participatory democracy and forms inspired by the common: whether they are platforms for deliberation, alternative currencies, voluntary work that enlarge the network of participation in the management of the public administration. It is extremely rare for a project to inscribe itself in the world of the common, which in a sense prepares the ground for the seeds of the future to be planted. D-CENT not only is actively involved through its experiments in this field, but it is recognised as one of the biggest projects imagined and financed by Europe for Europe.



The concrete measures of D-CENT's impact are important, but what really matters is that this project is opening new spaces for concrete experimentation of a future democratic society based on the common.

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