

## THE SUBJECTS OF/IN COMMONING AND THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF INFRASTRUCTURING THE COMMONS

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*Approaching the commons as a practice, as commoning, brings to the fore the concrete, historically, socially, and culturally situated mobilization of commoners around the resources they rely on or hold dear. However, the extent to which commoners are known, addressed, or even framed in relation to their engagement with and commitment to commoning still remains limited. This paper argues for the need to approach commoning through an ethos of care, which spurs us reconsidering the ‘neglected things’ and the things taken for granted in the discourses about commoners and commoning. In order to do so, this paper engages with the question how can our understanding of commoning and commoners be enriched by considering the affective dimension of engaging with such practice? As such, it focuses on the entanglement of affect, commoners, and commoning and it foregrounds commoners as subjects with their situated needs, expectations, and desires. A Spinozian-Deleuzian understanding of affect is adopted here which conceives it as a relational force that moves among bodies and enhances or diminishes their ability to act. Empirically, the paper builds on a two-year research that investigated the long-term sustainability of commoning and on the semi-structured interviews conducted therein with long-term commoners from three different practices: urban, digital, and knowledge commons. By identifying traces of affect in commoners’ narrations, the paper shows affect as a force mediating the tensions between continuing or interrupting the personal involvement in commoning; and as the indigenous’ awareness of something that keeps commoners and commoning together.*

*Keywords:* commoners, affect, long-term commoning, caring, labour

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### ABSTRACT

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, the commons – shared resources collectively managed outside the exclusive scope of market or State regimes – have gained renewed attention and interests from scholars, practitioners, activists, and policy-makers. Indeed, from a relatively limited concern over natural resources (Ostrom, 1990), the commons and their prefigurative politics for fairer and more sustainable ways of being in the world crossed over into several other domains – e.g. digital (Fuster Morell, 2014), urban (Borch and Kornberger, 2015), cultural (Bertacchini, 2012), activist (Jeppesen et al., 2014) – and disciplines – e.g. design and practitioner oriented ones (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015; Marttila et al., 2014), social and political sciences (Hoedemaekers et al., 2012; Ruivenkamp and Hilton, 2017), urban planning and policy-making (Hansen et al., 2016; Harvey, 2012). In particular, approaches centred on commoning started focusing on the engagement “in the social practices of managing a resource for everyone’s benefit” (Bollier, 2014: 16). Such approaches shifted the attention from the institutional arrangements that define the commons and safeguard them from enclosures onto the concrete, historically, socially, and culturally situated mobilization of commoners around the resources they rely on or hold dear. Thus, coming to acknowledge their intertwined nature and the fundamental fact that ‘there is no commons without commoning’ (Linebaugh, 2009).

The nurturing, spreading, and institutioning of the commons is increasingly appropriated and

represented as a plausible way to resist and create alternatives to the inequalities, contradictions, and threats of contemporary neo-liberal western societies. As they have become central to the imaginaries and transformative politics for more sustainable and fair ways of being and acting in the world, great expectations have been put on commons, commoning and commoners. As some scholars claim to idealize the commons can be problematic (De Angelis, 2013; Velicu and García-López, 2018), as it dismisses the serendipity, contradictions, mundanity and the everyday messiness of the labour underpinning the realization of viable alternatives which are able to cut across individual and collective needs, human and non-human ones, as well as local and global scales (Federici and Linebaugh, 2018; Nightingale, 2011; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Such idealization, for instance, hides the fact that under some circumstances nurturing some commons could only come from enclosures or State interventions and even to the detriment of other commons (Harvey, 2011); it makes us forget that commoning is inherently exclusive, as it demands forms of engagement and commitment which people have to both actively enter into and continuously re-enact (Nightingale, 2019); more importantly, it perpetuates the belief that a societal transformation, a transition towards sustainability and fairness, is ‘only’ a matter of becoming aware of and choosing the commons in order for it to be fulfilled (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis, 2013). I argue for the need to approach the commons through an ethos of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011), which spurs us reconsidering the ‘neglected things’ and the things taken for granted in the discourses about the commons. In particular, the extent to which commoners are known, addressed, or even framed in relation to their engagement with and commitment to commoning is still limited and often confined either to the framing of commoners as emergent collective subjectivities (Nightingale, 2011; Singh, 2017), or to specific niche areas within studies of commons-based peer production (CBPP) (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006) which address individuals’ motivations.

An ethos of care invites us to foreground commoners as subjects with their needs, expectations, and desires, and to understand how the engagement in commoning affect commoners in practice. More concretely, this paper engages with the question: *how can our understanding of commoning and commoners be enriched by considering the affective dimension of engaging with such practice?* In order to do so, the paper adopts a Spinozian-Deleuzian understanding of affect to provide a new perspective on the relationship between commoners and commoning. Empirically, the paper builds on a two-year research project that investigated the long-term sustainability of commoning by means of semi-structured interviews which are conducted with long-term commoners coming from three different practices: urban, digital, and knowledge commons.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, by relying on STS feminist scholar Puig de la Bellacasa, I clarify the meaning of approaching complex assemblages in-becoming which we are concerned with, through an ethos of care. Furthermore, I define affect and connect it with existing literature in commons studies. After a brief overview of the research context, the empirical section dwells into the told stories and lived experiences reported by three long-term commoners attending to three different commoning practices since nearly ten years. In the discussion section, I reflect on how the identification of traces of affect can help us better characterizing the commoners-commoning relationship and its connection to long-term commitments. Finally, the paper closes by calling for more studies that approach the commons, commoning, and the commoners with an ethos of care.

### CARING FOR THE NEGLECTED 'THINGS'

Consistently with their long standing work aimed at showing that objects and artefacts have politics (Winner, 1980), STS reinvigorated their concerns on this matter by stressing that the ways we frame and

represent the complex socio-technical assemblages that we study also bear their own politics, and therefore they affect how we can (or cannot) understand and act on them (Haraway, 1997; Latour, 2004). By inviting us to approach the unsettled and contested sociotechnical assemblages as *matters of care*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) tries to overcome the agnosticism portrayed by the latourian understanding of *matters of concern* – ‘things’ which society is preoccupied with and that are characterized by highly complex, historically situated, richly diverse gatherings whose objects of interest are uncertain and disputed (Latour, 2004, 2005). Puig de la Bellacasa argues that while *matters of concern* helps to understand the complexities of sociotechnical assemblages and their material-semiotic spheres, it does not prompt the pursuit for re-mediation of, for instance, injustices, exploitations, marginalizations, and ultimately asymmetries of power (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). In an age of environmental, socio-political, and economic turmoil, caring – understood in feminist terms – is a more adequate ethos for our knowledge politics than ‘just being concerned’. By vouching for (re-)framing matters of concern as matters of care, Puig de la Bellacasa tries to stage an ethos of research and knowledge politics that fosters engagement and commitment towards the very objects of study, and that enriches the three aspects mentioned above.

Over the past three decades, feminist STS scholars provided different ways to foreground and represent sociotechnical assemblages as matters of care: by revealing the mundane, taken for granted, and often devalued labour of caring for something, without replicating those asymmetries which devalued caring in the first place (Suchman, 2007); by working towards the production of standpoints which allow to study and talk about complex sociotechnical assemblages with new eyes, but that do not cast normative accounts of what standpoints are the morally right ones (Barad, 2007; Bowker and Star, 2000); or by allowing ourselves to become attached to and grow fond of these things and conveying such attachments through our research

and narratives. In short, to be affected by and to convey them in ways that also affect others (Haraway, 1997, 2013). Ultimately, by building on this tradition Puig de la Bellacasa prompts us to conceive *caring* as ‘a tool to think with’. A tool that highlights “an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation” (2011: 90); and which prompts us towards the “necessary yet mostly dismissed labours of everyday maintenance of life, an ethico-political commitment to neglected things, and the affective remaking of relationships with our objects” (2011: 100). In simple words, one way of embracing such an invitation in the case of the commons implies focusing on the micro-politics of performing the mundane, everyday labour of commoning, and basically to inquire how the commoners-commoning relationship is mediated by and imbued with affect.

### **Commoning and Affect**

Affect theory covers a sound and rich body of knowledge that consolidated since the early ‘90s in the social science and humanities and that increasingly extended beyond those disciplines (Clough, 2010; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Lawler, 2001; Tomkins, 1984). In short, the ‘affect turn’ testifies the will to overcome, ontologically and epistemologically, the centrality of the human subject in relation to agency and to move beyond the nature/culture, body/emotions, social/material dichotomies (Clough and Halley, 2007). It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a comprehensive and detailed outline of affect and affect theory. However, it is helpful to provide clarifications on how this construct is understood and used within this paper.

Approaches to affect range from the ones reflecting a psychobiological orientation (Tomkins, 1984) to those having social (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), cultural (Massumi, 1995), or organizational orientations (Gherardi, 2019). In continuity with these latter ones, affect is understood here in the Spinozian-Deleuzian sense of a force that is relational, moves among bodies, and enhances or

diminishes their ability to act (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). To this extent it is a non-subjective and anti-representational force: it does not resolve in emotions or other subjective states, although it links to them; it cannot be captured, described, and explained in its entirety, and therefore leaves us with a sense of wonder. In Brian Massumi’s words:

The reason to say “affect” rather than “emotion” is that affect carries a bodily connotation. Affect, coming out of Spinoza, is defined very basically as the ability to affect and be affected. But you have to think of the affect and being affected together as a complex, as two sides of the same phenomenon that cuts across subject positions. (2017: 109)

Affect spurs us to observe and capture assemblages of human and non-human bodies in becoming. It allows us to foreground how situated and embodied knowledge, emotions, expectations, needs, or desires are triggered through the ‘contact’ with other bodies, how these drive us to act (or not) in specific ways, and in turn how these actions (or lack thereof) trigger other human and non-human bodies.

Within commons studies, affect is still largely unexplored. Although a few relevant exceptions exist. These emerge from approaches based on ‘indigenous ontologies’ (Escobar, 2016; Illich, 1983) and the akin attempts to re-define commons and commoning as sites of production of subjectivities (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Nightingale, 2011; Singh, 2017). Here, affect is valuable in showing that the human/nature (or society/environment) relationship is not exclusively dominated by exploitation and overuse. On the contrary, and particularly for several local communities, such a relationship can fundamentally be one of co-becoming, attachment, and care. In continuity with this idea, Nightingale de-constructs the framing of commoners as ‘rational agents’ and of shared resources management as a practice driven by a traditional understanding of rationality and the

pursuit of management principles. If we look at how commoners relate to policy making in practice, then the attachments, emotions, and argumentative logic which commoners bring 'at the negotiation table' require us to embrace alternative rationalities or, as Nightingale puts it, the irrationality of the commons/-ers (2011). Similarly, Singh uses affect to re-define the commons as affective socio-nature relations and, therefore, as sites of affective encounters. This is, once again, an effort to overcome approaches focused on property rights and design principles, based on management and rational actions, and dominated by the 'market versus state regulated' debate (Singh, 2017). Without explicitly mentioning it, also Caffentzis and Federici conceive affective relations – attachments and commitment towards the commons, in their terms – as integral to the pursuit of a way of being human and in harmony with nature that is antithetical to neoliberal and capitalist form of resources exploitation (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014).

Furthermore, despite not being explicitly framed under affect theory, the affective dimension that characterizes the commoners-commoning relationship, emerges more evident from studies on commons-based peer production (CBPP). For instance, a sound body of literature has focussed on the motivation for the, often voluntary, engagement and participation in CBPP. This is largely linked to emotional and affective states such as the desires to learn and improve personal skills, to socialize and acquire a renowned status, as well as experiencing a form of personal enjoyment (Crowston and Fagnot, 2008; Krishnamurthy, 2006). At the same time, this body of literature has recently started showing that prolonged engagement in some cases can also lead to burnout and alienation, due to overcommitments (Poderi and Hakken, 2014), conflictual interpersonal relationships, or to the lack of an inclusive and supportive environment (Menking and Erickson, 2015). Similarly, the search for strategies for both the engagement management at the individual, personal level and the creation of more welcoming and supportive environments at the collective level

are emerging as relevant themes linked to the need for caring about the commoners and not only about the commons (Jiang et al., 2018). Overall, this body of literature shows the importance of continuing studying and representing commoners as subjects whose bodies come into play when they engage in commoning. Bodies that feel and express needs, emotions, expectations, knowledge and desires. Bodies that are affected by other bodies and, in turn, affect them while commoning in practice.

## RESEARCHING COMMONERS LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT THROUGH AFFECT

Empirically, the legitimate questions arise about how to look at affect and what to look at when investigating affect. Indeed, the conception of affect previously outlined opens to an empiricism of sensations, or an intra-empiricism (Clough, 2010). Namely, an empiricism that shifts from *inter*-actions among human and non-human bodies onto *intra*-actions: that which stands in-between actions (Barad, 2003). For this reason, some scholars see in the study of affect both a need and an opportunity for methodological experimentations that allow to study affect not as an 'object' or 'content', but rather as an entangled, relational process (Blackman, 2007). For this work, this means to identify and highlight the ways in which commoners' embodied knowledge, emotions, expectations, needs, or desires come into play in such practice. I briefly summarize the research at the basis of this paper and exemplifies encounters with affect here.

This paper builds on the empirical work done for a two-year research project (Jan 2018 – Jan 2020) on the temporal sustainability of commoning. The research relies on semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 long-term commoners recruited from three different commoning practices. Ethnographic observations complemented these interviews by focusing on the activities and infrastructures related to those practices. In particular, these concerned: a Free and Open-Source Software (FOSS) video game project, as a case of digital commons; an international European non-



governmental organization (NGO) for the promotion of FOSS and digital rights, as a case of knowledge commons; and a hackerspace located in northern Europe, as a case of urban commons. Initially, there was neither explicit intention to collect ‘empirical evidences’ of affect nor to make it part of the analysis. However, the relevance of affect in the long-term commitment to commoning started emerging already during the conduction of early interviews; and it increasingly presented itself as a meaningful dimension in the data analysis. At a practical level, interviews addressed (i) commoners’ interactions with other commoners and the tools harnessed for commoning; (ii) the boundary work existing between the commitment to commoning and other spheres of commoners’ lives; and (iii) commoners’ considerations on the challenges of sustaining a long-term involvement in commoning.

Traces of affect (Gherardi et al., 2019) emerged from their answers and the stories they told. Excerpts of those stories are introduced through three vignettes. These vignettes do not aim to be representative of the collective cultures of the commoning practices which the commoners attended to, neither they make any generalizable claim on the commoners-commoning relationship. On the contrary, the vignettes exemplify commoners’ unique, situated, subjective lived experiences and their entanglement with affect as they concern the meaning and implications of commoning in practice over the long term.

### **Mark and the urge to fix things**

Mark [1] started being involved with the hackerspace in its early days, when it was formally founded in 2009. As much as possible, this hackerspace is run with a grass-roots flat structure, with no formal hierarchies or roles, although a board does exist in connection to the formal association that takes responsibilities for rental contracts and bills. The physical space is around 200 square meters made of four main working rooms, and other four smaller ones used for storage. Several consumable materials, tools for harnessing

electronics and IT hardware (i.e. soldering tools, 3D printers, CNC and woodwork machines, PCB tools, etc.) are available for use to the commoners who also bear the responsibility to maintain and repair them. A wiki-based website, several mailing lists and social network channels are used for communication, archival, and organizational purposes. The payment of a small monthly fee allows anyone to gain independent access to the space at any time and day of the week.

Mark became part of the association board early on and he remained therein for several years. Since the hackerspace aims to foster creativity and experimentations with information technology, as well as being a space where formalisms and bureaucracy have only little space, this board has always tried to keep a symbolic role more than playing an active part in the shaping of the hackerspace governance and culture. In short, a ‘doer’ culture, a few formal rules and conduct guidelines, bi-monthly physical meetings, and a couple of online practices for collective deliberation are the ‘tools’ that allow the hackerspace to self-govern itself.

According to him and the other commoners I interviewed, this set of practices and norms are considered to work rather well for the majority of the situations. However, they show limitations under circumstances of severe stress or harsh conflicts: during the life of the hackerspace there have been three specific events that, according to the interviewees, could have tore apart the community, and the aftermaths of which are still present in the hackerspace and in Mark’s way to engage with it.

I am a guy who really try to, or better, if I see something that has some problems, or it does not work as well as it could, I really really feel the urge of trying to fix it. (Mark, Interview Oct 2018)

This was one of the very first things Mark told me about himself. An urge that, he repeated more than once, drove him to take active role in all of the three

crises: an attempt to relocate the hackerspace; a broad conflict involving a case of harassment; and a harsh conflict between two members.

In the first case, people in the hackerspace embarked on a project to find a new location. After a few possibilities were discarded, one was proposed which encountered large support. However, Mark and a couple other members were sceptical about that possibility due to a much higher rent, the bureaucracy linked to the co-location with other organizations, and, moreover, a different concept of space.

Also the space, it would be nicer. *It would have really pretty rooms with white new walls. Quite different from now, and we know, if you have a too-clean space, people are too afraid of doing things. If you already have a couple of holes in the wall and some mess around, it's not as scary or intimidating to do something. One day somebody just tore down a wall, which was a bit extreme, but the result was really nice. This would no longer be possible. [...] With a couple other people, I raised my concerns against the decision. I became really, really unpopular and everybody just kind of treated me as the buzz-killer. That was kind of a horrible time for me, and for a period I really came there less often.* (Mark, Interview Oct 2018)

Mark argued against the collective decision, because he was concerned by the potential disruptive change that the new hackerspace concept would bring. One of the reasons behind his concerns clearly showed his understanding of the hackerspace as an assemblage of practices and culture where even the configuration of space could affect people's attitude and engagement in doing (or not doing) things. The reactions Mark received and the stress he endured on those days, pushed him to take some distance. A distance which he took again a few years later, in connection to another episode:

I was really, really, really close to quitting myself, because I was tired of... That was really messy. We ended up voting for throwing them out. It is the once and only time that has happened. But that got overturned, because we were pressured to put it up for an extra vote, and people just overturned it [...] The scary thing, or what really pissed me off, was that people started, funnily enough, complaining that the board wasn't doing anything, even though everybody had agreed that the board shouldn't have anything to do with it [...] However, because the crisis had evolved that harsh, people started complaining about the board not doing anything. So we actually started having meetings again in the board to try fixing it. I think we spent more than 3000EUR on an external consultant. It was a big issue. *It just... I just... That was for me just... I got so pissed, because that was just... If you want me to do something, give me the power to do something. [...] I really felt I had to keep away from it, and I did it for a period of time.* (Mark, Interview Oct 2018)

During the escalation of the conflict, which involved directly four members around harassment accusations and, indirectly, those ones close to them, Mark and the board found themselves at the centre of some tensions. On one side, the feeling of responsibility as a board member and his tendency to 'try fixing things' pushed him to actively mobilize the vote for expelling (temporarily) the people involved in the conflict. On the other side, a culture opposed to top-down decisions invalidated the work done by the board. A stressful situation that brought him to rethink his presence and permanence in the hackerspace as well as to take complete distance from it for some time. However, only few years later, when he found himself amidst another conflict originating between two members, mindful of previous consequences and motivated not to let his desire to fix things preventing him from taking care of himself, he formally stepped out of the board.

When I tried to help, one of the two really rejected and physically pushed me away for trying to help. [...] *So I simply backed-off, I had to pull away, again, because of my tendency to try to fix things, I tend to forget to take care of myself before that. So I pulled away completely for almost half a year, and I stepped down from the board, because, again, I just saw the same thing happening as last time [...] There was no reason for me to be in a board if I didn't have any power to do anything. [...] But it was really really hard, because I was the only one left from the early days. So a bit over eight years, so for me it felt like a small child or I don't know. It is still a huge part of me.* (Mark, Interview Oct 2018)

Stepping down from the board had turned out a difficult decision to take, because during those days he realized the attachment he developed towards the hackerspace – “it felt like a small child”, “it is still a huge part of me”. Indeed, this decision did not result into a complete detachment, rather it pushed him to rethink his ways of commoning in the hackerspace. Namely, by doing practical project works at home, in the small lab he built in a spare room, and by going to socialize and share knowledge in the hackerspace when feeling in the proper mood.

When I do projects, I can sit at home and focus. And when I go there I can just be social, because it is still a really, really nice place to be social and a good place to ask questions and share knowledge. (Mark, Interview Oct 2018)

### **Sophie and the pursuit of a welcoming environment**

Since nine years, Sophie contributes to the NGO's mission by leading and coordinating the translation work for one of the languages which content (e.g. news, campaigns, reports, press releases) is provided in. Founded in 2001, this NGO pursues campaigning and lobbying activities for the

promotion of Free and Open Source Software principles. The formal organization is run by less than a dozen employees and as many volunteers, and its scope is fostered by thousands of volunteers contributing primarily from across Europe. The NGO acts as a knowledge hub that provides resources for and political weight to the challenges faced by the diffusion of FOSS. It targets software developers, individual adopters, IT companies, and public institutions. Furthermore, the NGO provides the infrastructure, tools, and coordination support to the large base of volunteers that commit to the organization's scope, and it sets the strategy targets for campaigning and lobbying. Commoning here is pursued through both online activities (i.e. participating through public discussion lists, translating documents and campaigns in several languages, contributing to campaign and web design, or system administration, etc.) and physical presence at local fairs or public events (i.e. running booths, giving small talks, organizing small events, etc.). For all language translations, commoners rely on a series of online tools ranging from repositories, trackers, discussion lists, and documentation pages. For languages which are supported by a relatively large number of translators (i.e. 8-10 divided between regular and occasional translators) one person usually acts as the formal coordinator in order to, for instance, avoid duplication of work and prioritizing urgent translations. Translations and content localization are not the only way for people to contribute to the NGO's mission. In fact it is possible to help systems administration, moderate mailing lists, organize local and international events, staff booths at fairs, and participate in collective discussions. However, the commoners I spoke to seem to consider the availability of content in multiple European languages to be very important in light of reaching out non-technical and non-English speaking people and, at the same time, a reason of pride.

When I asked her about the challenges she faced in connection to her involvement in the NGO, she dwelt on her personal way of organizing and committing to her role as coordinator, on the recruitment and



retention of other translators, and on the relevance of nurturing a supportive environment.

The way I volunteer differs greatly depending on what I'm doing. For instance, since two months I am also meeting with a GDPR group. *It feels really like I'm working, because it is very similar to my day-to-day work. [This] makes it very, very hard to motivate myself. When I'm translating, it is rather different and in a way it helps me evading myself in something else. It helps me to disconnect from work It feels very different and it is something I like to do. [...]* So, it really depends on the activity I'm volunteering for. *When it seems like duty, it is often harder to do, but when it differs from my daily job I like it more, and it is good for me.* (Sophie, Interview Jun 2018)

At a general level, there are some activities that, due to their materiality and specificities, greatly resemble her daily job, while others do not. These latter ones offer Sophie a diversion and an opportunity to evade from job-related stress or monotony. Indeed, engaging with those activities it is something that restores her. Nevertheless, the specificity of the commoning activities and their relationship with her daily job are not the only aspects that affect her way of engaging with the commons. In particular, she recalled specific periods in her life when she had to face difficult events linked to her private sphere and which affected her way of commoning.

I'm volunteering since a long time now, and I had some very tough events in my life. Whenever that happened, it either went in a way or the other. Either I'm volunteering a lot, a lot, a lot so I can think to anything and feel good, or I'm really not in the mood, in the right state of mind. Then I do not volunteer any more for several weeks. *That might be tough, because when there are people who rely on you, you feel like you should not do it [...]* in some cases, it is very, very tough. [...] But I should say that

everyone [here] is usually very nice and supportive. *If you are able to express that you are having difficulties in your life, they will try to find a way to help you and take the things that you are supposed to do and do them for you.* (Sophie, Interview Jun 2018)

Under these circumstances, an intense commitment to commoning helped Sophie coping with challenging times. However, occasionally she also found herself taking distance from commoning itself and such detachment, while difficult, it was made bearable – for her and the other commoners – thanks to a supportive environment where commoners are available and willing to take on and redistribute tasks or responsibilities in order to help each other.

According to Sophie, this supportive environment is something that other commoners, and newcomers in particular, shall feel and perceive. Moreover, it is something that needs to be nurtured and cared for actively. Only seldom, new translators start volunteering autonomously, probably encouraged by the call for volunteering published on the main website. Most often, finding new volunteers requires an active effort by Sophie and other collaborators, who explicitly encourage people to start contributing. According to Sophie, this works best when it is in conjunction with the launch of major campaigns or with their attendance to fairs and events, but the real challenge is to maintain over a long period those who start helping.

The problem is to keep them. And I think that the ones who interacted only with [the translation tools] did not stay long. While the ones who asked or proposed to translate something on the coordination list and interacted or received help from the regular translators remained. *Because they interacted with other volunteers and so they have felt being part of something, meeting other people who are nice and supportive and want to work with them. [...]* I have a strong feeling that the

difference between [...] one time volunteers and long-time volunteers is how much we interact with them. Me and other regulars tell them the value that it has for us what they are doing, and that we are happy to see them. At main events, we often organize drinks and evenings together. *They see, they feel that they are part of something with us and realize they can help us. I think it works better, because they see us, the humans, and not just the volunteers or the translation tools.* (Sophie, Interview Jun 2018)

The sheer number of commoners providing translation is not what she is concerned the most with: together with the other four, five regular translators, Sophie can already coordinate an adequate number of good quality translations. However, in occasion of main campaigns or urgent press releases having more people would greatly help to cover more content and, more importantly, to share the work load more evenly. Therefore, recruitment of new commoners is an activity she actively engages in, but she also devotes great care and attention to the nurturing of a welcoming environment that provides a sense of community, collaboration, and mutual help for those who engage with it. In her experience, feeling part of that kind of environment is what makes people stay.

### Albert and the challenges of overcommitment

Albert is a young self-taught developer who came close to the FOSS project nine years ago, when he was still a teenager. This project allows people to engage with the use, development, and maintenance of a video game along the principles and practices of community-driven FOSS. The game is supported through volunteer-based contributions and it is coordinated and organized as a bottom-up, grass-roots movement with no formal organizational structure [2]. Commoning happens nearly exclusively online, through the mediation of a complex ICT infrastructure (i.e. websites, multiplayer servers, bug tracking systems, forums, chat-rooms, code repositories), which is for a good

part also developed and maintained by the commoners. The game project started in 2003 as a personal experimental prototype for developing an open-source video game. In a few years, it attracted several developers, artists, and players. Hundreds of software coders, designers, and artists contributed over the years. Since his first approach, Albert started appreciating not only the video game in itself, but also the possibility to contribute to its actual development by coding. Such an opportunity allowed him to develop and improve his programming skills. Among the other commoners, he emerged as a highly talented and committed programmer, and he was granted the role of lead developer in 2015, which he still maintains nowadays. Similarly to many other FOSS project, beside still contributing or reviewing code, acting as lead developer or project manager also implies taking main decisions over the new versions of the game (e.g. timing and new features), identifying and pointing the attention over critical areas (e.g. software architecture and development infrastructure), and outlining the priorities for future development.

When we started discussing his involvement with the FOSS project and what that implied in the long term, he focused on the way such commitment changed his attitude towards the project, on the implications that an intense and dedicated commitment had for other spheres of his life, and his hesitations on the matter of leaving or remaining to contribute.

And as for playing, no, I am not really playing [the game] any more. I am nearly exclusively focused on development. *At some point, seeing the internals of something makes playing it rather less... fun or interesting, I guess? Since you see it in terms of features and code and less as an experience.* (Albert, Interview Sep 2018)

Since he started focusing on coding, Albert took distance from the FOSS project as a game, and basically stopped playing it, except for rare

occasions, when he needed to play test it. Stopping to play the game was not much connected to lack of time. Indeed, he always found enough time to dedicate to the project. On the contrary, seeing, understanding, and modifying the internal mechanisms of the game spoiled for him the possibility to enjoy it as a playful experience. This did not prevent him from enjoying his involvement over the years. In retrospective, Albert told me he also started considering the implications that such dedication and enjoyment in contributing had for other spheres of his life.

I am sure part of the reason I accomplished so much [with the game] is the fact that I spent so much, often I admit too much, time with it over the years. I confess, I have spent wayyy too much time on [the game] over the years, to the detriment of other things, my education included. I did enjoy it, though, and I think that is the challenge. *When you enjoy something so much, you tend to want to do it more than other things. Even to their detriment.* (Albert, Interview Sep 2018)

The commitment he devoted to the video game came to the detriment of his school education and his training as a software developer: he is currently able to master the programming languages, tools, and software architecture of the game, but by having disregarded the time and dedication needed for professional training, he now lacks broader software development skills, which would be relevant for being a developer in different domains or projects.

This, together with other reasons, made him recently rethink his permanence and type of involvement in the FOSS project. Indeed, a culture that is less inclined to experimentations than he wishes for and the technical limitations of the video game architecture, brought him to the verge of stepping away from such a commitment, although he never really pursued that intention until the end.

In short, technical problems and lack of many modern features combined with a sometimes backward-thinking team and community have sometimes made me want to quit [...] I guess that [the new social network] was a situation where I might have pushed something too hard as lead developer without fully explaining why I wanted it to be so. [...] *I am the project lead, but I am also younger than almost everyone else working on the project, and I have sometimes felt like I wasn't fully respected because of that, and that might be why sometimes I feel I need to push things.* [...] *I was seriously considering taking a long break after the [release] in May, but in the end that did not really happen.* [...] *Given the small team we have now and the amount of things I do, I worry the project would fall apart without someone in my shoes.* [...] Anyway, I guess I am sort of taking that break right now partly, since I started focusing also on web development. (Albert, Interview Sep 2018)

A person taking up the type and amount of work that he is currently responsible for would not be easy to find in the relatively small group of developers who supports the game, and the fear that his absence could cause some major problems, prevented him from leaving and spurred him to look for a renewed balance, which allows him to focus on other domains – i.e. web development – while maintaining his main responsibilities.

## DISCUSSION

Approaches based on 'indigenous ontologies' opened the way for moving past the narrow views that for far too long have confined the debate on the commons to issues of private-property and State intervention, or design principles and enclosures (Harvey, 2011; Mattei, 2012). Here, affect, understood in the Spinozian-Deleuzian sense, showed us how commoning practices act as assemblages for the production of collective subjectivities that are antithetical to neoliberal and capitalist form of resources exploitation (Caffentzis

and Federici, 2014). Nevertheless, the way in which commoners, as individual subjects, relate to such collective subjectivities in practice is somewhat neglected. Conceiving commons and commoning as deeply intertwined and accepting the fact that one cannot exist without the other (Linebaugh, 2009), it assumes that a certain degree of commitment and involvement by the commoners endures over time (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). Only over time, commoning can remove the exploitative, elitist, and unjust relationships existing that characterize contemporary use, maintenance, and access to resources and replace them with more sustainable and just ones (Kostakis and Bauwens, 2014). In this frame, the mundane labour that commoners perform in practice when caring for the commons is often neglected and taken for granted. By focusing on affect, it becomes clearer that for commoners caring for the commons is anything but taken for granted. It is an ethical and political labour that needs to be continuously (re)affirmed and which both triggers and is triggered by affective states. In their unique, situated contexts, for Mark, Julie, Albert, and the many other commoners which I interviewed and observed, commoning does not only mean to engage in sharing practices. It also implies the struggle to mediate and mitigate conflicts or to maintain welcoming environments, while at the same time struggling to fend-off self-exploitation, alienation or burnout.

The stories told by commoners about their lived experiences revealed traces of affect in two different, yet connected, ways: as a force mediating the tensions between continuing or interrupting the personal involvement in commoning; and as the commoners' awareness of something that keeps them and commoning together. First, the stories reported in the previous vignettes present a recurring pattern that other commoners also expressed in their answers. Despite each experience being very personal, situated and unique, they all expressed the intention to drastically reducing, or even stopping altogether, their long-term involvement. Affect was embedded in those concerns and the course of actions the commoners

pursued. For instance, the reappearing of conflictual and stressful situations, from which Mark cannot hold back from intervening, pushed him to step down from his role and take distance; but the very act of taking distance from the commons made him realize the deep attachment to it ("felt like a small child"). Secondly, commoners' narratives were often filled with entanglements of feelings, concerns, hopes, beliefs or attitudes with specific actions and decisions taken (or not). Commoners showed a certain awareness about them. For instance, they understood the extent to which a configuration of space ("white new walls and a too-clean space") can affect commoners' attitude to experiment and potentially disrupt existing practices. Similarly, they understood that experiencing a welcoming environment, where appreciations and support are provided and where interactions with humans are valued, it affects commoners in a way that makes them continue commoning. At the same time, thanks to a certain self-awareness or reflexivity, they expressed the understanding of how commoning in practice affect them personally. For instance, by being able to articulate how the materiality and specificity of activities influence the mood and the type of engagement commoners have with those activities, or how seeing the internal mechanisms of a game spoils its ability to provide an engaging experience.

## CONCLUSION

This paper followed the path laid out by those approaches that try move past the narrow views that for far too long have confined the debate on the commons to issues of private-property and State intervention, or design principles and enclosures (Harvey, 2011; Mattei, 2012). In particular, the paper picked-up the call made by STS feminist scholars with their invitation to approach complex entanglements through an ethos of care (Haraway, 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011), and it focused on a largely neglected aspect in commons literature: the mundane labour of everyday caring for the commons enacted and performed by commoners. In order to do so, the paper approached the affective

dimension of commoning and the way affect imbues both commoners' own engagement in commoning and the commoning practices themselves. In short, the paper highlighted traces of affect linked to long-term commoning as a force mediating the tensions between continuing or interrupting the personal involvement in commoning; and as the indigenous' awareness of something that keeps commoners and commoning together.

As the research for alternatives to neoliberal and capitalist form of resources exploitation and for more sustainable ways of being in the world often single out commons/-ing, focusing on affect and on the affective dimension of commoning can help us re-staging the complex commons/commoners/commoning assemblage through an ethos of care.

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## END NOTES

[1] Although a not-for-profit company exists with the sole purpose of handling donations and execute payments for infrastructure costs.

[2] Pseudonyms are used in this article.

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