



Knowledge for the Commons: What is Needed Now?

ADVANCING THE COMMONVERSE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE COMMONS (GUEST EDITORS: H. WAGENAAR & K. BARTELS)

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ABSTRACT

We set out a case for practice theory as a way to better understand and advance commoning, responding to calls for more communologies, that is, methodologies for the commons. Within the framing offered by practice theory, we argue for two potentially complementary ways of knowing: comparison and interpretation. These approaches and combinations of them are under-used in the field but are growing as additional ways of knowing that could inform both theory-building and practice. The aim is to add to the knowledge base for commons movements, as part of the mycelium for the commonsverse. Such a claim is not just a methodological or epistemological argument, but an argument about how to advance the commoning movement by rethinking how we try to understand and study it. Particularly, we focus on trying to bridge the gap between the utopian aspirations of commons movements and the realities of making such changes to existing ways of organising social, political and economic life. Worked examples by the authors are offered to illustrate the value of comparison and interpretation. One is from a 'comparative configurational analysis' of participatory budgeting, suggesting that some of the widely argued combinations of success factors for those initiatives are not borne out by the evidence. A second worked example showcases an innovative 'autoactionography' method, which helps to reveal the lived experiences of developing new practices of commoning, and how commoners in one place are creating strategies towards an ontological shift against dominant modes of social organisation. It concludes with a call for methodologies that foreground an understanding of the world as a recursive process of dynamic interplays between material resources, various forms of human agency and know-how, and ascribed meanings and aspirations.

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INTRODUCTION

People across the world are now developing commoning arrangements for resources which have traditionally been dominated by market or state control. Such arrangements seek to sustain shared resources, by regulating who controls and can access the benefits, with responsibility shared within a given community. For many, ideas of the commons have an inherently subversion nature, challenging destructive forms of aggressive neo-liberal capitalism by offering alternative models of social organisation (Caffentzis, 2004; Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2016; Bollier and Helfrich, 2019). Studies of the commons often take an optimistic stance, reflecting an orientation towards social movement building (Tummers and MacGregor, 2019, p.63). Whilst understandable, this approach can lead to a gap between idealised expectations and the messy realities of practice (Flinders et al., 2016). What ways of knowing could inform both commons theory-building and practice to advance the commoning movement? We respond to a research gap that has been identified by those calling for a new “communology” (Mattei and Mancall, 2019), that is, tailored methodologies to understand the commons and practices of commoning.

Our answer is to set out a case for practice theory as a way to better understand and advance commoning based on its ability to understand recursive dynamics and situated agency. Within the framing offered by practice theory, we argue for two complementary ways of knowing: comparison and interpretation. Strategies of mixed methods are well-established of course; many others have also made the case for systematic comparison of a large N of cases combined with in-depth ethnographic or action-research types of interpretation. Excellent examples exist of research that blends the “contextual richness of interpretive explanation” with the “the systematicity, robustness and transparency of large-N comparative analysis” (Wagenaar et al., 2022, p.1). Making this case in the context of the commoning field, however, is needed because these approaches and combinations of them are under-used. Such methods could add to the knowledge base for commons movements, or what Silke Helfrich (in whose memory this Special Issue is dedicated) has called a mycelium for the commonsverse. That is, a network of commons and of commoners, of their shared knowledge and caring, that underpins activities that may appear as individual growths but which are nourished and sustained by a common root system, which is critical to their effective spread.

Such a claim is not just a methodological or epistemological argument, but also a contribution to knowledge for practice, about how to advance the commoning movement by rethinking how we try to study it. Particularly, we focus on trying to bridge the gap between the utopian aspirations

of commons movements and the realities of making such changes to existing ways of organising social, political and economic life. At first glance, our proposed approach might seem a risky way to pursue a potential “onto-shift” (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019), that is, a transformational change in the way we understand the world and forms of social organisation. Comparison might simply highlight both the dearth of concrete instances in the world, also perhaps many failed attempts at commoning, buried in a tangle of internal battles, external attack, and lack of critical mass. Similarly, examining the implications of commoning at an inter-personal scale might look like the opposite of optimism. After all, the people involved have many stories to tell of hardship and struggle, often at personal cost.

However, we advocate in favour of close attention to empirical realities, following the counsel given by others committed to achieving change in difficult circumstances. Max Weber (1946, p.128) described political engagement as “a strong and slow boring of hard boards” and argued that practitioners must “arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes”. Indeed, implementing ideas of the commons has often been a “tough slog down a muddy road” (Davis, 2017, p.9). Optimism in the face of adversity is not naïve magical thinking (Boswell, 2022); turning towards ideals helps actors to continue to face challenges in their everyday work in the face of inevitable failures and disappointments. Optimism can also be buttressed by the knowledge gained in recognition of diverse practices and results across time and space.

We offer an evidence-informed perspective upon theoretical debates that are resonant with Bollier and Helfrich’s (2012, 2019) approach to identifying patterns of commoning, to build a movement underpinned by a relational worldview and common language. We contribute to the purpose of this special issue in developing underpinning infrastructures – a knowledge mycelium – for commoning by giving further recognition to the value of different ways of knowing for describing and advancing the commonsverse.

The structure for the paper reflects its status as a methodological proposition, illustrated with reflections on previous work by the authors. We begin by making our core case for comparison and interpretation, situated within the broader frame of practice theory. Worked examples are then offered which illustrate the value of comparison and interpretation. One is from a comparative configurational analysis of participatory budgeting, suggesting that some of the widely argued combinations of success factors for those initiatives are not borne out by the evidence. These methods have also been used in practice for movement-building. A second worked example showcases an

innovative ‘autoactionography’ method, which helps to reveal the lived experiences of developing new practices of commoning, and how commoners in one place are creating strategies towards an ontological shift against dominant modes of social organisation. It concludes with a call for methodologies that foreground an understanding of the world as a recursive process of dynamic interplays between material resources, various forms of human agency and know-how, and ascribed meanings and aspirations.

WAYS OF KNOWING FOR THE MYCELIUM

We respond here to a research gap that has been identified by leading commons scholars, who have called for better methods of understanding the commons and commoning – a “communology”- for example: “communalism [...] need[s] a radically new social science [...]an exciting and profound challenge [that we admit] we do not know how to respond to” (Mattei and Mancall, 2019, p.740). We disagree with Matei and Mancall’s own proposed solution, because they outright reject: “attempt[s] to imitate the natural sciences” (Mattei and Mancall, 2019, p.740). Such a rejection, for us, unnecessarily neglects the strengths that can be produced by blending epistemological approaches (Richardson et. al., 2019). Diverse ways of knowing could add a vital nutrient for Helfrich’s knowledge mycelium.

WAYS OF KNOWING: COMPARISON AND INTERPRETATION

Our claim here is that, to advance scholarship on commoning, we need methods that are both attuned to the rich detail of the practices of commoning (what we refer to as interpretation), as well as allow us to look comparatively across communities, places and resources. We make this case in the context of commoning, by explaining and demonstrating ways these methods have been operationalised in existing research. Such a contribution is important, because the benchmarks for good methods have proven quite challenging. While we do not purport to have fully fulfilled these criteria, ideally, appropriate methods would provide “transparent, systematic comparison[s]” as well as identify “equifinal causal patterns” (Richardson et. al., 2019). Another way of saying this is that there might be more than one route to the same outcome. Plausibly, more than one combination of factors might produce the same result in different contexts. As well, appropriate methods need to be able to “retain richness and nuance, and offer insights into policy application and concrete issues of participation” (Richardson et. al., 2019, *emphasis added*). The gaps in the current field include the need for

more robust empirical understandings of instances of commoning beyond aspirational or boosterist single case descriptions, methods that allow for better understandings of causality without losing richness and contingency, methods that are attuned to how concrete situations come about, and methods that are consistent with the values of the practices they study. We also identify a practice gap, where research also help to build practice.

Comparison and interpretation together combine ‘experience-distant’ approaches typically focused on systematically discerning patterns, with ‘experience-near’ approaches (Geertz, 1973; Schaffer, 2016). Comparison and interpretation are difficult processes to strictly isolate. It is hard (perhaps impossible) to interpret without comparing or compare without interpreting (Wagenaar et al., 2022). For example, one strategy associated with interpretation is that of ‘locating’ (Schaffer, 2016), which refers to situating concepts in and across different cultural, political, and temporal settings. However, as the examples in this paper will hopefully illustrate, locating practices in specific contexts is also a strategy for making sense of contradictions thrown up by comparing similar outcomes across different contexts with different sets of conditions, or comparing different outcomes from similar conditions. Situated comparison therefore assists in countering misplaced assumptions drawn from positive cases. For example, if there is an assumption that a particular positive case resulted from a particular set of factors, but we find negative cases with those factors, or other positive cases without those factors, then this is a good basis to think again about inferring universal success factors for a particular outcome. Comparison allows us to generalise causes and dynamics beyond a specific case, therefore challenging what some might term ‘bias’ towards learning from positive cases.

Despite the necessity of seeing comparison and interpretation together, as methodological shorthands, they are usefully distinct. They suggest quite different data gathering and analysis tools. Comparison of practices across different domains of commoning, different places, and/or times (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) can offer empirically-grounded, systematic and comparative analysis. Academic comparisons might also be useful as a way to offer greater systematic frameworks for commons practitioners, who already engage in informal comparisons themselves, for example activists in one country sharing experiences with others in another country. However, additional methods are also needed to fully capture the richness of experiences of commoning. For example, case studies, testimonies, and other hermeneutics deliver fuller explanations of how commoners practically engage with the world.

WAYS OF KNOWING: PRACTICE THEORY

We situate our proposition in the broad context of practice theory. Scholarly work in public administration, organisational studies and sociology over the last twenty years has seen a “turn to practice” (Schatzki et al., 2001; Wagenaar and Cook, 2003; Wagenaar, 2004; Freeman, Griggs, and Boaz, 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Bartels, 2017, p.3793) as a means of theorising the work of individuals (Schön, 1983; Forester, 1999), as well as organisations and teams (Schatzki, 2006). Practice theory primarily focuses on activities, what actors do, and how that is influenced by and influences particular understandings (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021) people have of a situation. These actions and understandings form identifiable sets of practices that operate in a particular context. As Ortner reflects, practice theory seeks to understand ‘how social beings, with [...] diverse motives and [...] intentions, make and transform [the world] in which they live’ (1989, p. 193). We also draw on the argument that: ‘a practice lens has much to offer scholars [of] complex, dynamic, transient, and unprecedented [phenomenon], as [an approach to] theorize [...] novel, indeterminate, and emergent phenomena [...]. We believe practice theory, with its focus on dynamics, relations, and enactment, is particularly well positioned to offer powerful analytical tools to help us’ (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1240).

The value of practice theory is in its acknowledgement of a recursive dynamic (Wagenaar, 2004) between the need to act in given situations – what Hupe and Hill (2007) refer to as an ‘action imperative’ – but to do so ‘in line with understandings that form their broader social and institutional context’ (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021, p. 280). That is, practice theory addresses the classic debate about the relative roles of structure and agency, by studying embedded agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Embedded agency is where agents are both enabled and constrained by their organizational, social and broader institutional context. Chiming with the intentions of commoning to find a ‘third way’ between the market and the state that enables communities to take action to shape their own futures (Walljasper and Ristau, 2011), practice theory is critical of both ‘individualistic notions of sociality on the one hand, and structural determinism on the other’ (Jonas and Littig, 2015, p.).

The social ontology underpinning practice theory is the premise that social reality is fundamentally made up of practices; that is, rather than seeing the social world as external to human agents or as socially constructed by them, this approach sees the social world as brought into being through everyday activity (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241). Such a philosophical approach accords well with

the fundamentally relational ontology proposed by Bollier and Helfrich, with a common thread (from Wittgenstein to Giddens and Bordieu) of understanding the world as a recursive process of dynamic interplay between structures, material resources, various forms of human agency and ascribed meanings. Silke Helfrich (2012) and many other scholars reject the notion that commons are ‘things’ with inherent characteristics that define them as commons. The commons are not something static, but something dynamic, like social relations. The context is formed and sustained, but also potentially modified through practices (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Giddens, 1979). Practices themselves are working configurations (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012), a term that refers to the idea that they are made up of connected elements that also have the potential to be sustained, and also amended, or stopped.

Practice theory offers a way to understand social relations and generate different kinds of intelligence. Practice theory unpacks the dynamics of change and stability by looking at three sets of interwoven elements: materials, such as resources, infrastructure, objects and so on; competencies, such as know-how and shared understandings; and meanings attached to practices by participants, their normative orientations and aspirations for alternative configurations of elements. The results of the inter-relationships of materials, competencies, and meanings are to generate and continue practices, or break old configurations, and make new practices for urban transformation (Durose et. al. 2016, 2021). A turn to practice draws our attention to how interactive agents (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012) conduct themselves (Durose et. al., 2016), as they seek to ‘transform their own urban worlds through everyday practices [...] and struggles’ (Brenner and Schmidt, 2015, p.178).

Why do these methodological approaches matter to us so much? Strengthening both greater comparison and interpretation will produce better knowledge about the practices of commoning. Holding different resources in common presents new governance dilemmas (Hess 2008) and attempts to sustain community control in these emergent commons are immensely challenging. Knowledge can help participants feel recognised and seen – an important contribution in its own right, particularly when commoning practices are not yet sufficiently codified in everyday life (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012, p.42).

An onto-shift is needed because commoning practices remain vulnerable to the stronger practices of “dominant projects” (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012, p.134; Harvey, 2000, p.258) supported by institutions occupying powerful positions. Such dominant projects orientate how people organise their lives and around what priorities, and what practices are recorded and communicated. Dominant

projects may be antithetical to practices of commoning, which are marginalised as a result. (Christophers, 2018). There is a need to “chart a politics of possibility in the face of incredulity and sometimes disdain” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xiv). These closing-down traits “render the world effectively uncontestable” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p.6), whereas commoning requires instead “a process that makes room for a host of alternative scriptings” (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p.147). A commons future is hard to conjure up for many, or for advocates to communicate their vision, especially when our perspectives are so heavily shaped by existing arrangements (Davis, 2015, p.4).

COMPARING (AND INTERPRETING) COMMONING: AN EXAMPLE

Comparison across different spatial instances of phenomenon focuses on particular crystallisations of configurations of practices in particular moments in time. Comparison captures a moment of stability. That does not mean that those practices are static or fixed; they are “temporary permanences” (Harvey, 2000). But there is a necessary path dependence to practices that suggests configurations do not change quickly, and establishing practices take time. Therefore, examples of the conditions under which new practices exist offer a window into the processes by which practices are arrived at. Comparison shows what relatively stable configurations result from complex interplays of particular dynamics *within* an example. These dynamics create a set of practices that have a particular shape in a particular period.

However, the more important point is that comparison crucially also captures dynamism at a more general theoretical level in what lessons we can draw about success factors. It does this by seeing dynamism *between* cases. It avoids reifying particular configurations of commoning (Richardson et. al., 2019). Reification is where a factor (or set of factors) that produced a specific result in one specific context is mistaken for ‘the’ causal factor for all cases in all places. Arguments for the one magic ingredient lead to ‘essentialising’ that feature. Essentialising is bad for dynamic explanations because it presumes an ‘essential’ cause, leading to understandings of causes that are overly-static. There are many examples in research where features that are contingent on peculiar contexts are (wrongly) conflated with features that ‘must’ be present for success to happen. For example, the existence of an active social movement is sometimes presented as a feature without which commoning does not happen. But, there are examples where this is not accurate. Comparing helps to flush out these assumptions, and so gives us a

more dynamic understanding of all of the moving parts that could make up a successful outcome in any particular place.

THE EXAMPLE OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

We can see the process of testing our assumptions in a study of participatory budgeting (PB) by one of the authors. One key motivation for the study was a desire to know ‘what worked’ to establish and deliver successful PB initiatives. In this study, different definitions of success were theoretically distinguished from each other, for example, a success like democratic control of decisions was differentiated from the fairer distribution of wealth. Using the measure of citizen or community control over budgetary decisions on public spending, his study defined success from failure empirically based on a variety of qualitative information that identified varying levels of de facto authority by citizens. This included observations of the extent of co-optation occurring in both the establishment of agendas and the final decision-making process.

Looking at the causes of success or failure, hypotheses drawn from the existing literature, built on high profile successful cases (such as Porte Alegre), offered potential explanations that highlighted long lists of necessary conditions. For example, successful PB was said to require very active civil societies and very sympathetic political leaderships and strong fiscal independence and committed reforming civil servants and so on and so forth. But it was not clear that all these conditions were key to success all the time. These long lists of requirements can establish an unnecessarily high barrier to entry to others. Some notable failed PB programmes also had some combinations of those factors. Many studies focused on the role of active civil societies and financial control in the success of PB, with financial control defined as whether implementers have the means to acquire or generate adequate funds for project administration and the execution of outcomes resulting from decisions.

The comparative research using QCA

Ryan’s study examined cases of participatory budgeting programmes across several cities in different countries. He then conducted a comparison of 30 different cases of PB, using a methodology called qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (Byrne and Ragin, 2009; Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). QCA respects the context-specific and contingent aspects of each rich case study example. It is also able to identify patterns across the cases, including multiple pathways towards the same outcome i.e. the criteria of equifinality, discussed earlier. QCA and its related family of approaches help a better discussion of possible hypotheses about factors for success by being transparent and systematic about assumptions and data (Ryan, 2016).

QCA and associated methodologies broadly involve the following sequences. A set of potential conditions for the causal outcome is identified. For PB, Ryan identified the commonly claimed success conditions in the literature were: political leaders committed to citizen participation, a financial basis for spending on both participation and implementing citizen's choices, active civil society demand for participation, and bureaucratic support for the PB. Identifying conditions contributes to the 'hypothesis building' phase. Relatively precise definitions of the conditions are developed, for example, what it means to have a strong civil society, or how would one assess whether there was support from political leaders. Ryan developed clearer definitions of the conditions by interacting with documentary evidence from the cases and sometimes working with case ethnographers to clarify interpretation and meaning (2021, p. 110).

The approach requires a dataset of qualitative cases with sufficient rich detail to make meaningful comparisons. His final model included 30 cases, 13 from Brazil, 2 each from France, Spain, and the US and cases from Argentina, Canada, Germany, Italy and Uruguay. The cases are then coded for whether the specified conditions were present or absent – this can be a simple yes/no but also the researcher can specify the extent to which the condition exists in each case on a sliding scale. What results is a table of all cases showing the presence or absence of each condition for each case. This table is then used to compare cases and identify patterns. Algorithms are applied to understand what combinations of conditions are sufficient to produce the outcomes. For examples, if case 1 has conditions A, B and C, and was successful, and case 2 has conditions A and B but not C and was successful then we can see that condition C was not a deciding factor. If several successful cases have conditions A, C and D, and another couple have conditions A, B and E, both are equally valid but different pathways to the same effective outcome. A series of hypothetically possible combinations of presence/absence of key conditions are then compared to the combinations of factors in the cases existing in the real world as evidenced by the data.

Findings from the comparative research, and how interpretation took place in the QCA study

Utilising this qualitative comparative procedure Ryan was able to establish that none of the long list of success conditions as described above were strictly necessary for citizen control (2021, p. 144). Each is observed (or not) to some extent where citizen control is both present and absent. A key finding challenged an often-asserted idea that PB requires financial autonomy. He showed instead that fiscal independence is irrelevant to explaining citizen control in cases where all actors – political, bureaucratic,

and civil society leaders – are committed to participatory democracy. But that is not to say that comparison leads to the conclusion that we do not know what causes success. The method allows us to produce an explanation about why financial independence might not be the crucial element everyone believed it to be. That is, when all the actors are all pulling in the same direction, their collective capital can overcome severe financial constraints.

QCA approaches retain the focus on the qualitative richness of each case to enhance the interpretation of the comparison. Going back to the narrative of each case helps understand the results of the QCA. For example, take the finding that bureaucratic support or fiscal independence alone can combine with political leadership to achieve citizen control in PB, without necessarily an existing strong civil society. Reading the literature the result about the role of civil society groups might come as a surprise. However, it is explained by observing that in smaller cities politicians worked with bureaucrats to build up civil society through the process. In larger cities, strong revenues helped political leaders deliver programmes even in the case of resistance or apathy from civil servants or civil society.

Examples like these suggest that transparent comparison can develop surprising hypotheses, based on the evidence. Anyone can engage and challenge our work. Of course, it is not the final word. Combinations of ways of knowing can develop rich dialogues that provide sustenance to the mycelium envisaged by Helfrich. For example, as happened in other of our work using QCA (Durose et al., 2021) to explore conditions for community control in Community Land Trusts (CLT) in the US and UK. Through the method of comparison, we developed a typology of types of CLTs explaining what forms community control took, or did not take, in each type. Commons advocates have used our typology, particularly the implication that CLTs vary in composition and goals (Chance, 2022), and do not need to necessarily follow a particular well-publicised 'heroic community' path to still produce social benefit. Practitioners also usefully challenged the nuance in the empirical findings. Our comparison opened up questions for practice such as "to what scale ownership and control operates at, in this case in a large county with a lot of very small communities. Can you develop a richer community life and participatory governance at this scale?" (Chance, 2022).

INTERPRETING (AND COMPARING) COMMONING: AN EXAMPLE

In QCA, a 'golden rule' is that one always goes back to the cases, as is described above, to help understand patterns and apparent anomalies. In the next section, we turn to

methodologies that could then be used after going back to the case, to uncover understandings of the dynamics in the cases. This section presents a proposition for reflexive forms of action-orientated research, using an example of ‘autoactionography’ by Steele of her work as a ‘commoner at large’ in her home town for over 15 years. She coined the term to define “the study of social action told and understood in real time from the perspective of those directly involved and used to inform and inspire further action” (p.93). Steele reflects on her own socio-spatial immersion both to learn about and to guide the creation and maintenance of practices of commoning. Geertz said “[d]oing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations and tendentious commentaries, but not written in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour” ([1973] 2000, p. 10). Transient examples of shaped behaviour are the subject of praxiography – attention to practices as the core analytical unit, a method to “stubbornly take notice of the techniques that make things visible, audible, tangible, knowable” (Mol, 2002, p. 33).

THE EXAMPLE OF THE HASTINGS COMMONS

As Helfrich and Bollier have said, the commons do not just fall from the sky, so how are commons made? The autoactionography is a case study of the Hastings Commons. Hastings is a medium-sized seaside town in the southeast of England, facing the twin challenges of post-industrial dereliction and the threat of gentrification. These twin issues, seen as “two sides of the same dialectical coin” (Steele, 2022, p.13) stemmed from years of state failure and market exploitation – not only a failure to invest but also the farming of dereliction; not just passive choices about what not to do but active choices that sustained the production of dereliction. In response, local people came together to collaboratively create community-led alternatives, a process which Steele (2022) calls ‘self-renovating neighbourhoods’. In Hastings, the group has focused on bringing buildings and spaces out of dereliction and re-developing them into community resources. They acquire ‘difficult’ buildings and renovate them through their ‘POD’ method – phased organic development. One member of the team captured the essence of POD: “we know what we’re doing even though we don’t know what we’re going to do!” [190207 Fieldnote].

Their results are impressive; Hastings Commons is made up of a complex of 12 buildings, with a total floorspace of 8,000 square metres, owned and managed by community-led organisations. Some buildings are already financially viable, with others currently under development using multi-funder financing. Although at various stages of

physical re-development, there are now already 89 managed workspaces, creative spaces and artists’ studios. There are local small businesses, such as a restaurant, and a gym. The group has developed its own affordable homes (12 occupied to date with a further 15 under development) with locally-defined affordability levels at a third of the local median wage. The housing is designed to further commoning, for example through communal spaces, and selection of tenants partly on willingness to contribute to collective activities. Work in Hastings reflects the triptych (p.76) of common resources, commoning as a verb, and commoners as those who take action together for the common good. In their words: “we look out for each other and we look after the place” (p. 249).

Practices in the Hastings Commons: materials

So how did a new set of practices take shape in Hastings to counter the heavy weight of the dominant paradigms? The case shows the dynamics of change through the interactions of the interwoven elements identified in practice theory: materials; competencies; and meanings attached to practices by participants, as well as their aspirations for alternative configurations. In doing so, it also reinforces the value of practice theory as a lens to understand cases. Critical to practice theory is the relationship between specific instances of situated action and the social world in which the action takes place (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241).

In Hastings, campaigning and mobilising have always operated alongside an attempt to build alternatives, for example through the extensive portfolio of buildings owned and managed by the Hastings Commons. Their strong emphasis on buying assets came after years of disempowering experiences and the conclusion that land and buildings are where power is stored. The dominant ownership model is both the problem to be tackled and the operating environment in which action must take place. The Hastings Commons is attempting a process of decommodification, but since property relations are mediated through a: “murky world of profit-driven agents, the negotiators of grassroots alternatives sometimes have to ‘jump in, do the deal, climb out, wash off” (p.309). The groups’ own language here illustrates their disgust with their experiences of contact with the dirtier aspects of the dominant model. They feel the need to wash themselves off afterwards.

The importance of buildings in the Hastings Commons is also an excellent example of the importance of materiality in practices; the objects embody and ground the practice, enabling it to be created and shown as an alternative form of social organisation (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012, Durose et. al., 2022). The first component of practices is materials, or things, in this case these include the many physical assets the group decided to amass into

community ownership. On 1 st October 2014, they ‘took vacant possession’ of a 1970 s office block (Rock House): “Those words were extremely meaningful: we repeated them to each other then and they have appeared in the story ever since. We now have a standard category of activity and budget called ‘take possession’” (p. 228).

Their buildings are unique and strange, for example the Observer Building is a dramatic sight with a grand 1920 s façade. Its original use was as a print factory for the local newspaper. Another building was a tumble-down horse stables in an alley at the rear of the Observer. The complex of twelve buildings are clustered around an old alley which is itself an original urban common. Creating new uses for the alley has been a focus for the group for this reason, for example, sandstone caves set into the rock at the rear of the Observer have been re-purposed as social and venue spaces. Collective cleaning, care-taking and patrolling of the alley now takes place in a previously under-used dank space that had dumped refuse. Now upgraded, cared for, beautified and seen as the core of the Hastings Commons. These practices make values tangible, reproducing: “a material ordering of the world in a way that contrasts with alternative and equally possible modes of ordering” (Mol, 2002, p. 141). Each building’s heritage has been skilfully respected, and they are deliberately very close together, acknowledging how successful neighbourhood dynamics operate at a fine-grain level, as well as the fine-grain scales at which people interact with physical places.

Alongside their physical properties – such as their strangeness – the group has understood the dynamic nature of materiality (the first component) and meanings (the third component). For example, when the Observer Building came into community-rooted ownership, it was still the same derelict building, but: “everything had changed” (p33). In order to materialise this shift, they held a ‘Show Your Love’ event when they took the keys on Valentine’s Day 2019. Examples like this exemplify the idea that: “places are not prefigured in their meanings to the people that use them” so they can transform them “not simply by physically reorganizing them, but also by ascribing new meanings to them” (DeFilippis (2004, p. 26).

Practices in the Hastings Commons: competencies

Hastings Commons has also been built through the deliberate development and sharing of necessary competencies – the second key component of practices. Deliberate in that their know-how has been built through collective work and a process of ongoing learning (Huron, 2018, p.172). The Hastings ‘commoners’ (tenants, team, trustees and other associates) take time together in diverse ways from formal meetings to regular socials (foyer drinks, breakfast club, team lunches), alongside

sustained community engagement. For them ‘socialising is work’ – because of the bonds it builds and the endless conversations about both values and tactics. The basis for their learning has been to just try things out. The literature on prefigurative politics highlights the importance of prefigurative sociality which often begins with trialling different ways of sharing around possessions, food and leisure (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021, p.649). There is a process of collectivising and political actualisation through sociability (Yates, 2015, p. 7), which builds a strong sense of “we” in the ecosystem. As others have also argued, the Hastings commoners’ sociability goes beyond socialising to include collaborative behaviours, distributed leadership and an understanding of differential commoning (Noterman, 2016; Bollier and Helfrich, 2019). They have harnessed and nurtured a wealth of skills in finance, fundraising, property development and management, lettings and tenant care, storytelling, engagement, negotiation, and time management. The Hastings core teams have required very broad competencies, but also dynamism, flexibility, responsiveness, and passionate commitment. Steele and her collaborators have consciously nurtured these aptitudes through recruitment and mentoring of paid staff, volunteers and organisational supporters such as Trustees. Even with people with impressive competencies, they still needed to try, fail, learn, and try again.

Their experiences reinforce the idea that an alternative commonsense requires a “different kind of operating system for society... hidden to minds steeped in market culture” (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012). Learning is needed on how to realise and sustain arrangements for collective responsibility and decision-making power over resources (deFilippis, 2004; Williams, 2018). The commons rely on people learning over time through experimentation – *metis*, as well as *techne* (Scott, 1998; Kumar, 2021). Learning to common is learning to argue productively (Huron, 2018: 173). In this process of “learning to common and commoning as learning” (Linebaugh, 2014, p.14), the work “inadvertently produces ‘repertoires’ of knowledge, skills, and resources” (Tadros, 2015 p.1345). As Sennett (2012) acknowledges, leadership, commoning, and collaboration are skills or talents that must be learned and practised, often through dogged persistence in the making of change against the odds.

Practices in the Hastings Commons: meanings

Explicit attention has also been paid in the Hastings Commons to sets of meanings that support commoning. Meanings and aspirations are the third key component making up practices. The group have been clear about how they attempt to deal with uncertainty, and how to keep momentum towards the larger goals with a group driven to see concrete change in the here and now. Steele reflects

that their most important aptitude is the ability to live with uncertainty and to face obstacles and challenges as part of the normal course of the work. She observes that commoning is importantly driven by impatience. One of Steele's interlocutors argued that:

The thing about impatience is it drives people to act instead of meet or lobby. It is much better to do a small thing and demonstrate change is possible, than wait to do a big thing. The action of sweeping the street, the action of painting the houses. Even if you do nothing else, at least you have done that (p.202)

This impatience however, also needs to run concurrently with opportunities to reflect: "We need more time to think about what's worth doing, rather than doing-doing-doing all the time" [190314 Fieldnote]. It also has implications for strategising for sustaining the commons, and the challenge of doing so, "without losing everything that made us agile, dynamic and rooted" [210630 Fieldnote].

Much can be learned from the case about some strategies used to sustain the intense work needed to promote the commons in a world not designed for it. Activists in Hastings have been trying to enact the commons in less than ideal conditions, sometimes hostile or actively rejecting, and where systems and structures were largely antithetical to the commonsverse. One of Steele's sobering reflections is of "relentless stress and pressures, relentlessly emotional as well, and risky... it's impossibly hard labour" (pp.185, 188). She says that commoning 'gets under your skin, into your veins, rewires your brain, and keeps your heart beating' (p.182), but also means the work is fragile, stressful and risks causing burnout for those involved. Maslach and Jackson define burnout as 'a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do "people work" of some kind' (1981, p.99; as reflects, burnout 'is a spectre that haunts us all' (p.211).

In response, Hastings activists tried hard to develop an ethic of self- and mutual-care based on 'social relationships of mutuality and trust (rather than dependence)' (Lawson, 2007, p.3). This focus 'brings to light not only the resilience of care but also the transformative potential of care ethics in contexts undergoing reform' (Power and Bergan, 2019, p.433). They refer to this as the 'need to find solidarity in fragility'. Fostering a politics of possibility also requires an "open and hospitable orientation... [drawing] on the pleasures of friendliness, trust, conviviality, and companionable connection" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p.6). As Alinsky said, "if your people are not having a ball there's something wrong with the tactic" (1989, p.128). Some

of the forms this has taken in Hastings include a party to mark and celebrate their first building achieving financial viability, and a 'Commoner's Rock' showcase event in the Alley at the heart of the commons.

HOW COMPARISON TOOK PLACE IN THE HASTINGS COMMONS

We have argued that interpretation and comparison can, and should, go hand-in-hand. The Hastings Commons has been enriched and nourished throughout by everyday acts of comparison. Activists from other areas of the UK and internationally have visited the Hastings Commons to learn from their ground-breaking work. Hastings activists have invited activists from elsewhere to share knowledge, including bringing the Organisation Workshop technique from Brazil. They have been on exchange visits to other commoning communities in the UK, South Korea, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Steele and her colleagues have been part of several dense networks of activists for several decades. In addition, there is a key act of comparison taking place in the autoactionography method used in this illustrative example. She spent seven years on a PhD that included the autoactionography example, amongst other cases of self-renovating neighbourhoods. In doing so, she engaged in a process of sense-making that is a starting point for comparison, and was able to elaborate points of comparison. Some of her comparisons were with other empirical examples, others were against theories, concepts and frameworks from the academic literature. Even naming the practices they were engaged in as practices of commoning, and herself as a commoner-at-large, was partly a result of an act of comparison with emerging practices in the UK together with the academic literature. This is most explicit in the 'Common Treasury of Adaptable Ideas', a project to bring inspirational grassroots practitioners from elsewhere to talk to large Hastings audiences followed by 'the hard work of adaptation'.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have responded to an identified gap in the existing literature for methodologies to study the commons and commoning. The aims in setting out our version of a 'communology' are to offer a better basis for understanding crucial questions of what ways of knowing could inform both commons theory-building and practice to advance the commoning movement. Our contribution has been to advocate for two complementary ways of knowing: comparison and interpretation, situated in the broader theoretical context of practice theory. The strengths this combination can bring include better

dynamic understandings as to how the situated agency of various commons actors has created the commons and commoning, or where instances of commoning have struggled. More consciously combining comparison and interpretation brings rich understandings of practices of commoning, but also to question assumptions about causal factors.

Comparison and interpretation go hand-in-hand and acknowledging their mutual interdependence aids the methodological robustness required to advance current understanding and explanation of commoning. These approaches both simplify and complexify understanding. We call for methodologies that foreground an understanding of the world as a recursive process of dynamic interplays between material resources, various forms of human agency and know-how, and ascribed meanings and aspirations.

The point of such methodological approaches is not to make general predictions or forecasts of the social world, but to provide the grounds for plausible conjectures (Boswell, Corbett and Rhodes, 2019) that also provide a guardrail against myopia in practical innovation. In the tough slog down the muddy roads of commoning, complementing interpretive ways of knowing with comparisons offers a space in which to sit, pause, and take stock. This reflective space could help those involved to abstract from the visceral experiences of internal and external disagreements, survival, and battles.

There are a number of implications of our argument that give food for further thought and reflection, of which we focus on one here. We have discussed methods for understanding how outcomes come about. Outcomes can be defined as along a continuum from success to failure, and one tricky issue is how to define success. The QCA example relies on a definition of success for the analysis of contributory factors to the outcomes. Substantive debates about specific definitions of success for these types of activities are a much bigger set of questions beyond the scope of this paper. What can be seen in the worked examples given is that those involved generated their own tailored definitions of success. In the PB example, tailoring meant responding to multiple different definitions prioritised in previous academic studies. In fact, Ryan shows the consequences of having different thresholds for successful citizen control – those who favour more ideal outcomes, compared to those who are willing to see success in more uncertain outcomes will infer different practical requirements for commoning. Transparent comparison over more or less relaxed definitions of success allows for more accurate but also dynamic interpretations of what combinations of causal factors are needed.

In the Hastings case, commoners have had to try, fail and try again. Their understandings of success are based on experiential knowledge, including being in ‘steady state’, when the buildings they own are earning more than they are costing, and it is therefore safe to transfer full ownership to the community land trust for the long term. Another consideration for success is engaging with ever-increasing numbers of people, especially those who usually miss out. While recognising the importance of ‘differential communing’ (Noterman 2016), they are seeking new ways to encourage and reward commoning, and trying to understand the preconditions for that, such as the sociability of their spaces. If the commons are intended to have an inherently subversive quality in a neo-liberal political economy, then how far has this been attained in the Hastings Commons? The case is an evolving exemplar of the feasibility, and also the challenges, of alternatives in the form of self-renovating neighbourhoods (SRN). The group wants to reach a critical mass of assets to guard more effectively against extreme pressures of neo-liberal capital as they directly affect their neighbourhood. However, their work must be judged in a rent gap context that very likely would have otherwise resulted in profit being devoured by rapacious and distant developers, supping with a long spoon.

Interpretation brings a critical lens to comparison, comparison asks questions of interpretation, and vice versa. In this sense, the abductive ‘cycling’ between comparison and interpretation helps us to unknow what we believe to be true when our beliefs require evidence-based interrogation. By placing our lived experience or the meaning ascribed to given practices in the context of what is happening elsewhere, its commonality and specificity can be better understood. Using and interweaving these different ways of knowing about the commons and commoning aims both to bring about a maturation in academic research on commoning by instilling methodological robustness, and to help develop the practical wisdom of (would be) commoners.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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