

CHAPTER 8

The Social Value of the Intellectual Commons: Conclusions on Commons-Based Value

8.1. Introduction

This chapter of the research elaborates on key findings of previous chapters in order to come up with more abstract statements on commons-based value, its sources, forms and mode of circulation and, finally, the value crisis challenging the interrelation between intellectual commons and capital. It is structured into the five following sections. The first offers a working definition of commons-based value in accordance with the findings of the research. The second determines productive communal activity as the source of commons-based value. The third analyses the forms of commons-based value. The fourth sketches out the basic characteristics of the mode of commons-based value circulation. The fifth and final substantive section examines the crises of value encountered in the sphere of the intellectual commons. Overall, this chapter offers a social theory of commons-based value circulation with normative dimensions in respect of the morality of the intellectual commons.

8.2. Social Value in the Intellectual Commons

Throughout the conduct of the research, participants have defined social value as what is important in their specific social context. This importance has been attributed to various practices of commoning, such as collaboration and utility, voluntary contribution and trust, openness and solidarity, participation and consensual decision-making. Taking into account these findings, commons-based values can be defined as collectively constructed representations in the particular context of intellectual commons communities of what constitutes meaningful social activity. This concurs with the anthropological conception

How to cite this book chapter:

Broumas, A. 2020. *Intellectual Commons and the Law: A Normative Theory for Commons-Based Peer Production*. Pp. 119–127. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book49.h>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND

of social value as ‘the meaning or importance society ascribes to an object’ (Graeber 2001, 15, 39, 46–47).

The specificities of commons-based value in the communities of the sample have been found to be inherently related to their communal context. What is valuable for commoners depends on collective judgements about value constructed within their community (Simmel 2001, 65). This supports the assumption that the evaluation of what is important is preceded by the collective attribution of meaning to action, which in itself presupposes a total system of meaning (Saussure 1966). As Castoriadis writes, ‘society cannot institute itself without instituting itself as “something” and this “something” is necessarily already an imaginary signification’ (Castoriadis 1997, 269). The collective attribution of importance to a specific activity of commoning thus presupposes the existence of a commons community with a collective conception about social value and its own place in society. Commons-based value thus appears to be preceded by a communal plexus of imaginary significations regarding the commons and their value for society. It is only by being integrated into this larger action-guiding mechanism that each practice of commoning acquires meaning and becomes worth pursuing.

8.3. Productive Communal Activity as the Source of Commons-Based Value

Social value in the intellectual commons occurs through the movement and transformation of matter. The movement of matter is both an objective/non-transitive phenomenon and a social phenomenon that acquires meaning and value within and through its social context (Fuchs 2016, 35). The movement of matter within the spheres of the intellectual commons therefore circulates and pools together social values.

It follows that social value necessarily comes into being through human action consolidated in social practices. Rather than being an individual activity, any practice of commoning is a communal process – many commoners act together in the community as a combined worker. Value production in the commons is, therefore, inherently socialised. In addition, to produce value, practices of commoning are necessarily intentional and productive in the sense of contributing to social reproduction (Graeber 2001, 58–59, 76). Along these lines, research findings reveal the following value-producing practices in each of the four social dimensions under examination:

	Economic	Social	Cultural	Political
Value-producing practices	Collaboration	Contribution in productive activity/ unalienated work	Sharing	Participation

Table 8.1: Forms of productive communal activity in the communities of the intellectual commons.

Source: Author

Commons-based values are objectified in the movement and transformation of matter caused by the foregoing practices. The common denominator of all these practices is that they constitute forms of productive communal activity, i.e. unalienated work defined in the widest possible way (De Angelis 2007, 24; Fuchs 2014, 37; Graeber 2001, 68). As a corollary, productive communal activity – intermingled with matter – should be considered the source of commons-based values.

8.4. The Forms of Commons-Based Value

What is valued in each social formation is greatly dependent on the interrelation between dominant and alternative social forces in each socio-historical context. Contests over value lie at the heart of politics. For conventional economics, value is considered to be solely produced at the point of exchange and, therefore, the only form of social value that supposedly exists is exchange value. Hence, all other forms of social value are either concealed or at best described as positive externalities or spillovers to the commodity market value system.

By monitoring the circulation of commons-based value in its multitudinous manifestations, the current research follows a non-economistic approach to the phenomenon of social value, examining its formulations in all facets of social activity on an equal footing. According to the outcomes of the current research, commons-based values unfold in economic, *stricto sensu* social, cultural and political manifestations. The following table exhibits the main forms that commons-based value takes in the communities under examination:

	Economic	Social	Cultural	Political
Values	Use value	Merit	Mutual aid	Self-empowerment

Table 8.2: Main forms of commons-based value in the communities of the intellectual commons.

Source: Author

By no means do such manifestations imply the existence of separate domains of social activity. Rather, they refer to aspects and characteristics of the same communal practices of production, distribution and consumption of intellectual resources pooled together in common. In other words, they constitute dimensions of the same value practices and value spheres, which emerge in undifferentiated continuity, as they constitute integrated sets of social relations.

In contemporary capital-dominated societies, commodity markets are the dominant system of value circulation. In the framework of commodity markets, actors interrelate through impersonal transactions mediated by the exchange of monetary values. Monetary value prevails as the universal equivalent of value and, as a result, frames and conditions the attribution, production, circulation

and ranking of all other social values. Yet, the primary social function of money is its accumulation as capital. In this function, money operates less as a means of exchange and more as an end in itself, i.e. as the final outcome of the tendency to accumulate. The function of accumulation thus transforms money into the dominant social power of our age. Apart from operating as the universal equivalent of all other values, this makes money in our societies the ultimate form of the accumulation of social power. By contrast, commons-based values in all their forms are generated and are, thus, dependent upon face-to-face interpersonal and communal relationships (Bollier 2008, 251). Owing to this characteristic they become both means of value circulation and ends in themselves. Their strong connection with face-to-face human relations also renders the qualities of their formulations difficult to quantify and essentially different from each other. As a result, commons-based values, especially their non-economic forms, are relatively incommensurable and commons-based value spheres lack general forms of value equivalence.

Despite the finding that commons-based value circulation and value pooling lack a universal equivalent of value, research has shown that a certain value form has central importance in commons-based value spheres due to their dependence on the flourishing of communal bonds. This value form is communal trust. Interviewees from both the contested and co-opted communities under examination have repeatedly stressed the crucial role that trust plays in the sustenance of practices of commoning. Indicatively, Hackerspace members characterised trust as very important for the community, since it is the reason for the smooth operation of community affairs. Overall, research coding and analysis on trust have yielded data in greater quality and quantity than other codes of the research. For this reason, it can be safely claimed that trust appears to constitute the cornerstone of commons-based value circulation and value pooling.

8.5. The Mode of Commons-Based Value Circulation

In the current research, the circulation of commons-based values is analysed as a totality. In this context, the research outcomes reveal a rich diversity of forms and circuits of commons-based value. This inherent attribute of the intellectual commons makes them inappropriate to be conceptualised, described, analysed and governed as systems. The inertness of the systemic approach entails the risk of disregarding the diversity and of ignoring the fluid interrelation of the intellectual commons with their environment. Instead of approaching the intellectual commons as systems, analysis should rather focus on modes of value circulation and value pooling. Such modes evolve through time in a dialectical manner, both framing practices of commoning and being reproduced and reformulated by them in reflexivity to internal and external factors of change.

As a starting point, it can be claimed that social value and its circulation/allocation take specific historical forms depending on each social context and modes of social reproduction. In relation to the intellectual commons, the repetition of practices of commoning converges into a specific mode of commons-based value circulation and value pooling. Such a mode is constituted by sequences of value transformation and circuits of value flow. In terms of value sequences, research has revealed that the transformation of value is structured around practices of value generation, value flow/circulation, value pooling and, finally, value redistribution. In the intellectual commons, value allocation is achieved by practices of pooling intangible resources together in pools of information, communication, knowledge and culture held in common. Pooling, instead of reciprocity, is the foundation of the mode of circulation/allocation of commons-based values. Instead of being privately appropriated as in commodity markets, value allocation within the spheres of the intellectual commons is socialised.

Pooling is a superior mode of value allocation. When productive communities of the intellectual commons possess institutions that guarantee that the value output of their production remains within the virtuous circle of commons-based peer production, then practices of pooling resources in common acquire network effects. This gives rise to an expansion of both the quantity/quality of production and the size of productive communities, which has been characterised as the 'cornucopia of the commons' (Bollier 2007, 34). The communities of the study have deliberately constructed specific mechanisms to pool together their value output and avoid its capture by commodity market forces. First of all, contested communities have reduced their exposure to monetary exchange and have invented alternative practices to garner resources and work. Secondly, commoners have managed to construct practices of exchange based on generalised reciprocity as means to avoid the quantification of commons-based value and its subsequent co-optation by the commodity market value system.⁴⁷ Accordingly, communities have developed non-commodified social practices of transvestment in order to transfer value flows from the commodity market to the sphere of the commons, such as peer-to-peer donations and funding.⁴⁸ Furthermore, certain communities, especially contested ones, employ more aggressive strategies of social appropriation vis-à-vis commodity markets in order to pool together social values, such as the expropriation of privately owned commodities. Finally, all the contested and most of the co-opted communities in the sample instituted informal communal rules and/or adopted legal norms, such as copyleft licences, to prohibit the private appropriation and commodification of common pool resources. This phenomenon of deliberately expanding the pooling of resources in common can be termed commonification. Contrary to the opposite transformations of commodification, commonification transforms social relations, which generate marketable commodities valued for what they can bring in exchange, into social relations, which generate resources produced by multiple creators in communal

collaboration, openly accessible to communities or the wider society and valued for their use. For this reason, pooling should be considered the most important practice of commoning in the quest of the intellectual commons for value sovereignty.

Society is reproduced through the circulation and allocation of multiple forms of social value and according to diverse value spheres (Appadurai 1988, 14–15). Any time social forces of commonification reveal themselves by producing forms of value alternative to the dominant value system of commodity markets, these sets of communal value practices articulate themselves in commons-based value spheres. The transformation from one form of value to another renders possible the transition of value between different value spheres. As Gregory describes it, ‘things are valued in many different ways over the course of their “life” [...] people can switch from one value regime to another as, for example, when gold is purchased as a commodity, given as a gift to a daughter and passed on to descendants as a family heirloom’ (Gregory 2000, 110). The boundaries between intellectual commons and commodity markets are thus porous and susceptible to permeability and interchange. Nevertheless, capital holds a strategic position in the general circulation of values in society owing to the imposition of commodity market institutions from the state as the dominant value system of society. Such a position gives capital the structural power to control the switch between diverse and heterogeneous social values and money.

Along these lines, the mode of commons-based value circulation is dialectically interrelated with the dominant mode of capitalist value circulation and the dominant value system of commodity markets. This dialectical relation takes various forms. Alternative conceptions of the importance people attribute to action, which are generated within the intellectual commons, are heavily influenced by the social prevalence of economic exchange value and commodity markets. When coping with resource scarcity in societies inundated with commodities, intellectual commons communities face severe pressure to transform part or the entirety of their value output into economic exchange values and money. This influence upon the circulation and pooling of commons-based values by exchanging value and money is manifested in hybrid forms of co-opted value circuits within the intellectual commons. Co-opted value forms, as described in the previous section, act as switches of value transformation from the commons-based value spheres to the commodity market value system. At the point when co-opted circuits predominate contested circuits of commons-based value, intellectual commons communities either break down or are gradually transformed into for-profit enterprises and their social aims are subsumed under the prevailing logic of capital accumulation. From this follows that intellectual commons are nowhere to be found as full-fledged realisations of the potential of commonification but rather appear as sets of practices fulfilled to the extent possible by the co-relations between forces of commonification and commodification.

By contrast, commons-based values constitute conceptions of what is socially important activity not just within communities of the intellectual commons but also in society as a whole (De Angelis 2007, 179). Communities of the intellectual commons are not isolated but, rather, lie at the core of socially reproductive activity. Commons-based values are constantly redistributed to society, thus contributing to its reproduction. Through its widespread social circulation, commons-based value redistribution challenges dominant perceptions about social value. In particular, it challenges the dominant perception of economic exchange value as the primary, or even exclusive, form of social value and of commodity markets as the primary, or even exclusive, societal value system. Practices of commoning that generate commons-based values reveal in practice the fallacy that social activities are not productive if they do not create economic exchange value and are, therefore, not monetarily quantifiable. In this way, the flow of commons-based values to society calls into question hegemonic ideologies regarding what should be rewarded or not by social institutions. It is the moment when the intellectual commons loom out of invisibility that social reorientation on a mass scale gradually becomes possible.

8.6. Crises of Value

Key findings of the research show that both the contested and the co-opted communities of the sample receive pressure from monetary scarcity to varying degrees. This breakdown of value circulation is due to the fact that the flow of commons-based values to society, as explicitly confirmed to be taking place by all participants in the study, is basically not remunerated by a counter-flow of social values towards the communities of the intellectual commons.

The unsustainable value flows recorded in the study give a hint of a more general contradiction in the current sublation between intellectual commons and capital. By controlling the dominant system (commodity market) and the universal equivalent (money) of social value, capital is in a position to dominate the circuits of commons-based value circulation and value pooling. This structural superiority gives the power to capital to capture the values of the commons and switch them into money. Value capture is a more appropriate term than wage labour to describe such strategies of capital accumulation. Wage labour is a specific co-relation of social power between labour and capital. Yet, even in orthodox Marxist political economy, wage labour was never considered to be the sole means through which capital accumulates its socio-economic power. Marxists always acknowledged other ways of value capture by capital, which involve co-relations of social power other than wage labour. Marx talked of the primitive accumulation of capital (Marx 1990, 896). Luxemburg observed that primitive accumulation is a continuous phenomenon throughout colonialist and imperialist epochs (Luxemburg 2003, 447). Harvey conjoined various contemporary phenomena of value capture under the term 'accumulation by

dispossession' (Harvey 2003, 137). All such phenomena have in common the capturing of value through power mechanisms other than wage labour. Along the same lines, Hardt and Negri write, 'exploitation under the hegemony of immaterial labor is no longer primarily the expropriation of value measured by individual or collective labor time but rather the capture of value that is produced by cooperative labor and that becomes increasingly common through its circulation in social networks' (Hardt and Negri 2004, 113). For them, commons-based values are produced in relative autonomy to the power of capital: 'In contrast to industry, extraction relies on forms of wealth that to a large extent preexist the engagement of capital [...] Whereas in the factory workers cooperate according to schemes and discipline dictated by the capitalist, here value is produced through social cooperation not directly organized by capital—social cooperation that is, in that sense, relatively autonomous' (Hardt and Negri 2017, 120). Accordingly, apart from non-remunerated labour, a variety of value capture mechanisms takes place in the dialectics between commons-based and commodity market value spheres, which can be generally described under the umbrella term 'value capture'. Through value capture, commons-based value spheres are to varying degrees ravaged by the hijacking of commons-based values by capital without opposite value flows to counter-balance the loss (Kostakis and Bauwens 2014, 26). Accordingly, communal relations of value circulation/allocation, which sustain the intellectual commons, are eroded by the penetration of the commodity and the logic of capital accumulation (De Angelis 2007, 215; Hyde 2007, 96–99). The result is a crisis of value circulation, wherein the producers of value (commoners) are deprived of the means to reproduce the social relations (intellectual commons), which make such value generation and circulation possible (Bauwens and Niaros 2017).

This value crisis appears to be confined within the boundaries of the intellectual commons. Nevertheless, such a hypothesis remains on the surface of things. Deeper analysis reveals that the capitalist mode of intellectual production, distribution and consumption is dependent on the intellectual commons. The fundamental 'law of motion' of capital is its tendency to expand by subsuming terrains of commoning previously left relatively outside the reproduction of capital. With regard to the intellectual commons, such subsumption is accomplished by valorising the output of commons-based peer production in multiple ways. Yet, capital is incapable of reproducing the relations of commons-based peer production, upon which its mechanisms of value capture are dependent, since such mechanisms are external to the organisation of commons-based value generation. Even in the co-opted spheres of the commons their subsumption by capital remains formal and does not penetrate the organisation of commons-based peer production. Secondly, value capture is a transformative process of valorisation. Through this process, relations of commonification are dissolved, i.e. commons-based values are displaced by economic exchange and monetary forms of value. By dissolving the commons, capital destroys the very productive base upon which it stands. Hence, capitalist

reproduction at the level of intellectual social activity becomes unsustainable and destroys its own conditions of existence. In this context, dysfunctions of intellectual property-enabled commodity markets and capital accumulation in the networked information economy should be viewed as repercussions of the unsustainable commodification of our commonwealth.

In conclusion, the unsustainable value flows monitored in the current study indicate the existence of wider crises of value in the interrelation between intellectual commons and capital. This unsustainability reveals the pressing need for the institution of counter-flows of value from commodity markets to the intellectual commons, in order to restore the balance in the circulation of social value between these two spheres. As Bauwens and Niaros have spelled out, value sovereignty for the communities of the intellectual commons necessitates the constitution of practices of commoning for the ‘reverse co-optation’ of capitalist values and their transformation into commons-based values (Bauwens and Niaros 2017, 4–6).

8.7. Conclusion

The current research backs with empirical data the presence of an alternative proto-mode of value circulation based on the intellectual commons, which supports the reproduction of the intellectual bases of our societies in dialectical interrelation to the dominant capitalist mode. It is, therefore, a straightforward dispute of the ideological perspective that money is the sole form of social value and that commodity markets subsume the totality of value circulation in our societies. By contrast, this research generally supports the hypothesis that commons-based circuits of value circulation and value pooling are at work in all dimensions of social activity, thus significantly contributing to social reproduction. Finally, by exploiting the power of critical political economy as a methodological tool for sociological research on the commons, this study has the aim of rendering commons-based value visible to activists, researchers and policymakers and fuelling practices, policies and laws that unleash their potential.

The next chapter of the book recapitulates the arguments of both the current social research project on commons-based value and all other previous chapters regarding the moral significance of the intellectual commons with the aim of offering a unified normative theory of the intellectual commons in support of an intellectual commons law.