As a form of counter-capitalist political discourse, much of the language associated with the commons relies on the idea of some form of universal/ontological ground—a “natural” relationship between people, spaces and resources that has become erased through moves to enclose and to capture by destructive economic and political systems\(^1\). In these discourses, the drive to enclose can seem impossible to resist. This article proposes a different politics of the common: one that moves away from thinking about commons as that which is lost and which needs mourning, towards practices of commoning that, in many ways in at many different scales, work to produce a feeling of being in common. These feelings have the potential to elicit a change in consciousness and subjectivity that may have far-reaching political implications in terms of resisting neoliberal forms of life and experience.

Some of those who make claims for commons may do so in the name of ontology—or a foundational notion of right. This evocation of a natural state of holding resources in common is problematic, since it may invoke a primal state of communion with nature that is, of course fantasy and at its worst can invoking a “noble savage” figure and relies on a problematic model of social evolutionism in order to make its claim. These ontological claims to the commons tend to rely on a binary understanding of nature/society. Locke, for example, saw the commons in terms of the bounty of nature as made available to humanity—the “common wealth of the material world” which introduces a troubling nature-society dualism.

Discourses of the commons are often haunted by the idea of loss, where the forces of increasing enclosure and capture evoke the enclosure movement of the long nineteenth century, and its powerful narratives of law and land. In these stories and discourses, the commons are positioned as that which we once had, but have now gone. Political movements that draw on these narratives can play out as a mourning of this loss, rather than a mobilisation of these ideas as a tool for considering new and emerging terrains for building common worlds.

Instead of focusing on “the commons”, then, as that which is lost, or as a natural relationship of livelihood and land, I suggest we leave behind us questions of ontology and of nature in favour of a phenomenological approach. This politics of the commons follows the work of Peter Linebaugh in employing the verb “commoning” to think about the processes and practices involved in helping to build worlds together. The usual story told is that we participate

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\(^1\) This essay is adapted from the publication “Problems of Participation: Reflections on Authority, Democracy, and the Struggle for Common Life”. [http://www.authorityresearch.net/essay-collection-problems-of-participation.html](http://www.authorityresearch.net/essay-collection-problems-of-participation.html)
in society through our relationship to our immediate families, and through our relationship to 
the State (what it does for us/what we have to give it) as individuals and families. The “com-
moning” that I outline here stems from practices that look beyond our immediate worlds, 
and an ethos that considers the effects of our actions in these terms. If we feel like we inhabit 
common worlds — that we have shared stakes that extend beyond the immediate — then we 
can foster an ethos of collective responsibility and care towards the world. We can produce 
the social, and make common worlds, interrupting the story that society is made up of 
individuals and families and governments, with nothing in between.

As scholars and activists we 
can look at how the feeling of 
being in common is produced 
in different spaces and through 
different practices. These 
practices might include overtly 
political attempts to redefine 
the ‘commons’, or to reclaim particular spaces as held in common (for example the occupy 
movement), as well as those practices that also contribute to a sense of shared experience 
— that produce conviviality (common life) — like eating together, undergoing trauma, or 
parenthood. Political messages have weight when they are felt bodily, when they resonate 
with lived experience. This means that our experience of living in the world allows for some 
ideas to stick and for some to not. So some claims to solidarity may alienate people because 
there is a disconnect, a disjuncture, between message and experience, while others can 
bring people together in unexpected ways. Paying attention to practices helps us to think 
about how a sense of being in common, a sense of making a shared world, is achieved; what 
situations ‘grip’ us.

Rhetorical claims of commonality are augmented affectively through lived experience. For 
example, the daily experience and struggle of labour as necessity or obligation may be reso-
nant with the production and augmentation of a sense of an “us” as hard-working, tax-pay-
ing citizens. It may also, perhaps in different political contexts, lead to a sense of being part 
of a collective labour movement. Press images of protestors who do not work, and whose 
upper-middle class background is stressed do not resonate with the experience of most 
working- and middle-class lives. Their authority to speak on behalf of others is undermined 
by their distance from the lived experience of those others, and the constant accentuation of 
that difference in the media.

A politics of the common, then, can involve practices that make people feel part of some-
thing, and feel like they have collective stakes. This involves thinking about the material 
ways in which the common is produced that organises bodies so that a sense of shared life 
is enabled and fostered. This may take place through the ordering of spaces – low fences 
and back alleys were highlighted in the sociologist Valerie Walkerdine’s discussion of how 
working class communities in a Steelworks Town felt in common- and through objects 
/community defibrillators, memorials, tea, PCs) as well as through the things that people 
say and do . Sometimes it is possible to identify specific moments through which a sense of 
the common is produced – moments that may be unexpected. These moments are sites of 
the political and may indeed take place in unlikely places, for example in moments of shared 
living that give rise to a conviviality that exceeds the original framing of an event. Walkerdine 
discusses communal ‘beingness’ as a sense of holding or containment (being held). She 
writes of this containment as being produced in the Steelworks Town, through “a long history
of difficult and dangerous work, which must produce an anxiety about annihilation and the necessity to find ways of coping which could produce a sense of the continuity and security to counter the extreme uncertainty of the employment situation”. So a sense of shared being, the production of common life, emerges in this instance as a way of coping with material conditions of precarity and struggle. It is not invoked; rather it takes place as a result of material and affective conditions of shared existence.

If lived experience can lead to this sense of being and becoming part of something, of partaking in a common world, then a new politics of the common can concern itself with what can be done to bring this about: how “practices of the common” can be used as a counter strategy to regimes of individualisation and neoliberalisation. Practising a politics of the common involves working out how to nurture these collective ways of being, in order to produce a sense of the “we” that is keenly felt. In doing so, shared practices and spaces can be claimed as common, and can produce a recognition of our shared stakes. The recognition and production of collective stakes can move us to do things that extend beyond our immediate mode of concern, that move away from the family/state dichotomy which neoliberal individualism and big state policies produce. This draws attention to our participation in making worlds beyond our immediate desires and needs, and contributes to our sense of commonality, our feeling of being in common. This is especially true of the collective power of small acts: we are social creatures, and we learn from each other. People who want to resist this dichotomy, and participate in a shared world can do this through small acts of commoning, for example by picking up litter when walking along, or weeding and sweeping the pavement near our houses, using the street in ways other than walking and driving along, or looking after communal areas at work.

These small acts of commoning are important: their ethic of care fosters a mode of being in the world which engages us as active subjects. The commons produced through them is not a lost and mourned world, or one harking back to a foundational fiction, but instead is a lived, practised and felt world. To frame a counter-capitalist politics around active commoning rather than the static ideal of the commons, enables a pragmatic, participatory politics that feels achievable and is not crushed under the seemingly unstoppable forces of enclosure.

References
Linebaugh P, 2008 The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles)