

# Revisiting Crisis from the Perspective of the Commons and Metabolism

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## Abstract

This article explores the concept of the commons and metabolism as a critical framework for understanding and addressing the polycrisis catalyzed by and accumulated within capitalism. Combining discussions of the Marxian concept of ‘metabolic rift’ and the discourse of the commons from a relational perspective, it articulates the commons as a social metabolism that produces commoners interconnected with human and non-human others in the commons. It also discusses how the enclosure of the commons has disrupted the social metabolism and caused what I call the metabolic rift in subjectivities, transforming humans into individualistic agents pursuing self-interest. This process, marked by the commodification of labor and the dismantling of larger communal relations, not only intensifies social precarity but also creates an epistemological view of humans as separate from nature, leading to the exploitation of both nature and humans. By articulating the commons as a social metabolism, both in terms of process and outcome, and by integrating the dimension of subjectivities overlooked in existing discussions of metabolic rift, this article aims to deepen our understanding of current crises and advance the discourse on transformative political and ecological paradigms.

## I. Introduction

Over the past three decades, neoliberal policies such as labor flexibility and financialization have intensified social precarity, resulting in multiple crises of social reproduction (Fumagalli and Morini, 2013; Mezzadri, 2022). These crises are manifested in declining birth rates, aging populations, and fragmented communities. At the same time, the profit-driven capitalist economy has exacerbated the climate crisis, leading to unprecedented natural disasters and revealing systemic ecological instability (Archer and Rahmstorf, 2009; Cappelli, Costantini and Consoli, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, linked to large-scale animal agriculture and ecological habitat destruction, highlighted the fragility of our interconnected world and exposed governmental inadequacies in crisis response (Stumberg and Martin, 2020; Watson et al., 2020).

The proliferation of crises underscores a systemic failure within capitalism, where instability is not an anomaly but a defining characteristic (see Fraser, 2023; Moore, 2015). The pandemic has shattered the illusion of human that control over the environment, highlighting the deep interconnectedness of living and non-living beings and the need for systemic change beyond isolated crisis management. Crises are intertwined at multiple levels and scales, emerging as a polycrisis that challenges the sustainability of the planet, the ultimate and absolute commons for all (Jørgensen et al., 2023; Saito, 2023).

In response to these interrelated crises, the concept of the commons has emerged as a framework to address the challenges and move away from capitalism dominated by the neoliberal market and the authoritarian state (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015; De Angelis, 2007; Harvey, 2011). However, prevailing definitions of the commons often inadvertently reinforce the modern dichotomies between humans (subject) and nature (object), perpetuating existing epistemological traps that have caused the current crises (see also Metzger, 2015). To overcome these limitations and effectively confront the current crises, we must develop

new languages, concepts, and epistemologies that challenge dominant paradigms and integrate diverse perspectives. Radical scholars have pursued such an epistemological shift by defining the commons as acts of co-production that generate various physical and social commons, including communal relations and subjectivities (Linebaugh, 2008; Negri and Casarino, 2008).

Building on this collective work, this article aims to explore the commons as a metabolic process by drawing on Marx's (1991) concept of 'metabolic rift' and discussions around it (see Mészáros, 2000; Moore, 2000; Saito, 2020). While the existing discussion of the metabolic rift provides a valuable tool for understanding contemporary polycrisis in a comprehensive and radical way, it overlooks the dimension of subjectivities that is crucial for transforming metabolic processes from within. This paper rearticulates both the commons and capitalism in terms of metabolism, especially by incorporating the dimension of subjectivities. It then reconsiders the current crises from the perspective of the metabolic rift caused by the capitalist process of enclosure of the commons. In doing so, it aims to contribute to advancing our collective understanding of crisis and to catalyzing discussions for reactivating social metabolism beyond the constraints of modernity and the so-called homo economicus embedded in it.

The remainder of the paper consists of a main body in which I theorize the commons and capitalism from a metabolic perspective and a concluding section. The main body consists of three sections. In section 1, I theorize the commons and capitalism as different modes of production of subjectivities. In section 2, I redefine the commons and capitalism from a metabolic perspective, by drawing on Marx's concept of metabolism and metabolic rift. I then discuss how the existing discussion overlooks a crucial dimension, namely the rift in subjectivities. Section 3 articulates what the metabolic rift in subjectivities means by discussing how the commons and capitalism produce specific subjectivities through different metabolic processes. In doing so, it elucidates the ecological and social crises produced by homo economicus, the subjectivity produced by the metabolic rift. The theorization is followed by remarks on the summary and main contributions of the paper.

## **II. Theorizing the Commons and Capitalism from a Metabolic Perspective**

### **1. The Commons and Capitalism as Different Modes of Production of *Subjectivities***

#### **1.1 The Commons as Mode(s) of Co-production of Relational Subjectivities**

The term commons is strongly associated with natural resources such as forests, water, and land that are collectively owned and managed by members of a community, i.e., traditional forms of the commons (see Ostrom, 1990). Needless to say, it is important to protect and reclaim such forms of the commons, as discussed by Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (2001). We should note, however, that the commons are not defined by the intrinsic properties of something, but by the mode of collective production and distribution. The commons are embedded in social relations and practices that collectively produce and share surplus. Linebaugh (2008: 279) therefore suggests that "[i]t might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substance". Similarly, Negri (in Negri & Casarino, 2008: 83) defines "the common" as "the activity that builds things together".

Throughout human history, people have created various forms of physical and social commons, including various forms of communities through acts of co-production (De Angelis, 2007; Linebaugh, 2008). In other words,

the commons refer to perennial relations and practices in which people reproduce themselves together in relation to the environment. On the other hand, capitalist relations have been created and reproduced through a constant process of enclosure of the commons, or what Marx (1976) calls the ‘means of production’ (see also Federici, 2004). In order to implement the capitalist system, capitalism needed free individuals who relied solely on their own bodies as a source of labor power to earn a living. The process of enclosure in this context refers to the process of creating free individuals by separating people from various social and physical commons.

There has been “an infinite variety of commons, the collective administration of common resources” (Graeber, 2008: 7). It is important to note that the commons, as various forms of collective co-production, are not only produced in and through communal relations, but also produce those very relations (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Han and Imamasa 2015). People in the commons perceive themselves as part of a community or an expanding world in which various human and nonhuman others are connected, albeit at different levels and scales (see Mauss, 2000; Scheurmann, 1976).

## 1.2 Capitalism as a Mode of Production of Atomized Subjectivities

Unlike in the commons, people in capitalist relations see themselves as independent individuals. One of the most striking examples is found in the speeches of Tuiavii (in Scheurmann, 1976), the chief of the island of Samoa. On his visit to Europe, Tuiavii was shocked to find people suffering from hunger while the markets were full of stored food. Coming from a culture that had no word for “mine” or “yours”, while “lau”, the word for “ours” or “God’s”, took center stage, the Samoan chief could not understand how stupid the Europeans were. This episode illustrates the prevalence of the commons in the way Samoans felt and related to one another, in contrast to the Europeans who had come to take for granted, and thus to submit to the notion of the private property of an independent individual.

Privatization and commodification have invaded even the most intimate spheres of human life. Not only things from the earth, but also socially (re)produced things such as ideas, knowledge, language, codes, affections, and social relations that have been produced as the commons of humanity are being exploited for free by capital (Fuchs, 2012; Midnight Notes Collective, 1990). As scholars point out, almost every aspect of life has been commodified, and even “sense’ has been colonized by the sense of capital” to borrow De Angelis’ (2017: 171) phrase. Communal relations have been significantly diminished in capitalist society, and the commons have become “situated outside ... in an environment in which predator capitalist systems are ready to enclose or subordinate” (ibid.:33). People have internalized the idea of self-reliance and produced themselves as homo-economicus promoted by the field of economics (Anderson, 2000).

In this regard, Graeber (2006: 69) argues that the theory of the mode of production should be developed to see “the production of people and social relations”. While most of the discourses developed around Marx’s concept of the mode of production define ‘production’ simply as the production of material objects. In most societies, however, the production of things like houses and canoes is seen as a subordinate moment in a larger process of producing and shaping people (see Graeber, 2001). In other words, the mode of production is always about the

production of people, i.e., subjectivities. Indeed, this view resonates strongly with Marx and Engels (1845: 8) when they define the mode of production by making it clear that the mode of production is “a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part”. It also allows us to see the commons and capitalism as different modes of production of subjectivities that correspond to and express each other, and to ask what is the mechanism through which different subjectivities are produced.

How do people come to see themselves either as self-made individuals or as part of a community that is opening up to the larger interconnected world? In this regard, we need to rethink the dichotomy of the individual and the collective since capitalism, like all other forms of production, is also a form of “social cooperation” (De Angelis, 2007: 36). As Read (2011: 116-9) asserts, “individuation is an unavoidably social process”. Balibar (2018: 8) also suggests that capitalism is problematic not because it alienates relations, but because it produces “alienation as relation”. That is, capitalism, like all other forms of community, is a specific mode of what Marx (1973: 15) calls “socially determined individual production”.

## **2. Looking at the Commons and Capitalism through the lens of Metabolism**

In order to make the transition to the commons concrete, we should delve into the social process of individual production. Marx’s concept of ‘metabolism’ provides us with a lens through which to do so.

At the most fundamental level, the commons as co-production signifies an act of life and development. According to Damasio (2018: section 4, para. 4), from single cells to the nervous system and even the mind, the “long process of evolution and growth” takes place under the principle of cooperation, in which each bacterium or cell gives up its independence and gains access to the “commons”. Life itself appeared on this planet 3.8 billion years ago through the same process. Since then, it has (re)produced itself and evolved in numerous ways. As Damasio (ibid: section 2, para. 3) points out, metabolism is “the single name for the chemical pathways that accomplished the feat”.

Metabolism applies from the cellular level to species and ecosystems (Brown et al., 2004). Tsing (2015: 135) describes how the commons, or “latent commons” in her own term, are everywhere as “entanglements that might be mobilized in common cause”. To use Tsing’s words, metabolism is about “collaboration” that is always with us but beyond our maneuver. She calls the process of entanglement “world-making projects”, always plural, overlapping and contaminating. Different species, human and non-human, are involved in the process at different scales, creating heterogeneous “patch ecologies” (ibid.: 201).

While considering metabolism as an activity of all life, human and non-human, Marx (1976) tries to grasp how metabolism is specifically organized in human societies. He points out how metabolism appears to human beings as an act of labor. Marx (ibid.: 283) states, “Labor is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man [...] mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature”. The metabolic process is a natural-ecological process and is common to every historical stage, because the primary material condition, that is the fact that man is a part of nature, cannot be abolished (see also Saito, 2020). At the same time, however, this primary condition is mediated differently by different historical social relations.

According to Marx (1991: 949, cited in Saito, 2020: 13), capitalist production “produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process between social metabolism and the natural metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of the soil” and “disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth”. In this sense, it can be said that the purpose of his book *Capital* is to analyze how capitalist relations mediate primary metabolism by disturbing and rifting it.

Saito (2020), based on Marx's theory of metabolic rift and discussions on the theory, proposes three dimensions in Marx's concept of metabolic rift, namely, the rift in the metabolic cycle of nature, the spatial rift, and the temporal rift. The first is the rift in the material circulation within the metabolic cycle of nature. Marx describes how capitalist agriculture disrupts the nutrient cycles of the soil by forcing plants to absorb nutrients rapidly and in large quantities so that they can be sold as commodities to urban consumers. The second dimension is the spatial rift that results from the concentration of the working class in cities. The spatial rift leads to uneven development and thus antagonistic spatial segregation. The metabolic rift now extends globally through long-distance trade, causing resource depletion and pollution in peripheral areas while central regions accumulate wealth. The final dimension is the temporal rift. This highlights the discrepancy between the slow formation processes of nature and the accelerated turnover time of capital. Capital's drive to maximize profit and revolutionize production outpaces nature's ability to regenerate resources such as soil nutrients and fossil fuels. This creates a significant imbalance, as exemplified by excessive deforestation under capitalism.

The theory of the metabolic rift allows us to understand the current polycrisis from a comprehensive and radical perspective. However, I believe that the theory of the metabolic rift could be better articulated by adding the dimension of subjectivity, which is the most crucial aspect if we consider capitalism as a specific mode of production of subjectivity. In the following section, I discuss how the commons, as a social metabolism, produces commoners as part of the performative circuit(s) created by and simultaneously catalyzing the metabolism. I also discuss how the process of enclosure promoted by capitalism has disrupted this metabolic process, leading to the emergence of the *homo economicus*, the self-interested individuals. I call this the metabolic rift in subjectivities.

### **3. The Metabolic Rift in Subjectivities and the Birth of *Homo Economicus***

#### **3.1 The Production of Commoners through Social Metabolism**

On an ontological level, commoning always occurs as contingent and ubiquitous co-activities between different agents, human and non-human, producing a variety of material, immaterial, and relational surpluses. In terms of human life, humans have also produced surplus through labor, an act of metabolism. Importantly, labor takes place not only between humans and nature, but also among humans. By organizing specific ways of circulating, distributing and/or sharing material and affective surplus with others, people have reproduced various forms of community, the unit of collective life (see Graeber, 2001; Malinowski, 2013; Mauss, 2000).

Mészáros (2000) develops the concept of ‘social metabolism’ to analyze the capitalist mode of production as a historically unique way of (re)organizing the metabolic interaction. However, the concept can be applied more broadly. As scholars have discussed, the commons has been the fundamental principle by which people have

organized their livelihoods throughout a long history (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Linebaugh, 2019). Nevertheless, the commons does not take a universal form. As Linebaugh (2008: 44) notes, “commoning is embedded in a labor process; it inheres in a particular praxis of field, upland, forest, marsh, coast”. The concept of social metabolism allows us to articulate the commons as multiple process of creating plural, open ecologies in relation to the surrounding environments.

First and foremost, the metabolism between humans and nature has produced physical commons such as common land or forests (Ostrom, 1990). There have also been different practices of organizing collective labor and distributing the surplus in specific ways without making it a commodity (Azzellini, 2018; Euler, 2018). Different practices of the commons have produced different forms of communities and commoners, that is, a folk of people who share common sensibilities and values (Graeber, 2011). Here, immaterial commons such as affections and sensibilities are inscribed in material commons and forms of community, while material commons and communities facilitate the production of particular bodies and sensibilities (see Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). Using the concept of metabolism, we can understand the commons as a constantly (re)produced arrangement, or a performative circuit that is created by and simultaneously catalyzes the metabolic process. Different actors and their practices mutually constitute each other as parts of the interwoven circuits, i.e., the commons, creating a specific ecological world that is open to the outside.

In terms of the production of subjectivity, it is important that there is no division between subject (human) and object (nature) in the commons. The commons “expresses social relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature” (Linebaugh, 2008 :279). Because work in the commons is more directly connected to multiple human and nonhuman others, commoners see themselves as a part of a larger world rather than as individuals separate from nature. Various folk religions and animist thought around the world demonstrate how people see animate and inanimate things as having souls and being connected to them within the web of life (see Ginzburg, 1983; Harvey, 2005).

When one feels the profound interconnectedness, one’s labor as an activity that catalyzes and strengthens that very interconnectedness is inevitably imbued with an attitude of care. The attitude of the farmer who fertilizes and cultivates the land to nourish it reflects a worldview in which caring for others is not only altruistic but also necessary to sustain one’s own well-being (see Gupta, 2013; Shiva and Mies, 2014). The Squamish Chief’s 1854 quote highlights how commoners perceive the world as a fundamentally interconnected web of connections and changes that affect both living and non-living things.

Our dead never forget this beautiful world that gave them being. (...) Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. (...) the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch. (...) Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the

dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2 Homo Economicus as the outcome of a disturbed metabolism

In the context of the capitalist mode of production, the enclosure of the commons marked a crucial shift in which individuals began to perceive themselves as independent entities. This enclosure was not just about physically fencing off the commons land; it involved a broader separation of people from the entangled world, breaking the sense of interconnectedness, socially and ecologically. I call this process metabolic rift in subjectivities.

Three key points are critical to understanding this transformation. First, human beings are fundamentally dependent on others. From the moment of birth, we need the care of others (Tronto, 1998). Based on this ontological precariousness, people have produced the commons as an ethical and ontological foundation of their collective life (Butler, 2004; Lorey, 2010). Second, in this regard, how people work and build different forms of home(s) are essentially acts of metabolism, or what Tsing (2015) calls “world-making projects”. Third, the process of enclosure has disrupted the metabolism, thereby creating metabolic rift in subjectivities. Of course, metabolism as an act of life continues in capitalist societies. But it does so in a disrupted form in the specific arrangement of capitalism in which metabolism is mediated by money.

This rearrangement has been done by changing the way people work and make home(s) to reproduce their lives. On the one hand, people separated from the commons must enter into wage-labor relations to make a living, but the sale of labor is never guaranteed (Marx, 1976). This is why Lorey (2015) argues that ‘precarity’ is not an outcome of neoliberal policies but an inherent experience of capitalism. At the same time, various forms of community have been dismantled, increasing the level of precarity. Institutional and ideological arrangements have established the modern nuclear family, framed by the strong gender roles, as the only possible realm for people to deal with precarity and reproduce their lives personally (Federici, 2004; Shorter, 1975). In this context, people began to perceive themselves as self-made individuals, while the pursuit of self-interest became the only rational behavior.

Crucially, enclosure also creates an epistemological divide, inventing the modern dichotomy between humans and nature (Latour, 2004). Separated from the commons, humans began to see nature as a passive object to be used and managed (Metzger, 2015). In fact, the distinction between humans (subjects) and nature (objects) is false. The process of enclosure commodifies both humans and nature. Nevertheless, this epistemological division has been crucial to the establishment of a profit-driven economy that requires people to view nature as cheap raw materials to be exploited (Moore, 2015; Fraser, 2023). The care inscribed in the labor of the commoner is inefficient in terms of capitalist accumulation. The sense of connectedness must be destroyed in the pursuit of profit.

In sum, the so-called homo economicus was born through the enclosure of the commons, which caused the

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<sup>1</sup> There are several versions of this speech, but the one I am quoting is considered the closest to the original. It was written by Dr. Henry Adams, who served as translator at the summit, and published in the Seattle Sunday Star in 1887. Source: <https://orenda-arts.org/chief-seattles-oration/>

metabolic lift of subjectivities. Enclosure cut off labor as an act of social metabolism that produces the commons and turned various social and material commons, including labor, into commodities. It not only alienated people from their own activities but also changed the purpose of labor from the reproduction of people and communities to the acquisition of money, the only metabolic medium, for survival (Graeber, 2013; Marx, 1976). Here, Kant's (cited in Kerstein, 2009) preaching that one should never treat others "merely as a means to an end" is simply empty. People even treat themselves as means, as commodities to be sold for money. At the same time, these individuals, the automated and homogeneous subjectivity, live in a metabolism that is dwarfed by the repetition of extremely small cycles. While they think of themselves as "free" individuals pursuing their own interests, what characterizes subjectivity in the shrunk and rigid metabolic cycle is an extreme passivity symbolized by the same desire. It is this metabolic rift in subjectivities that lies at the heart of the polycrisis we are facing.

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

The conceptualizations of the commons as social metabolism and metabolic rift in capitalism provide an articulated theoretical framework through which to understand the polycrisis of our time. As I have argued, capitalism and the commons represent fundamentally different modes of production of subjectivities and social relations. Capitalism, rooted in the enclosure of the commons, has generated what I call a metabolic rift in subjectivities, producing homo economicus. This metabolic rift in subjectivities has been caused by enclosure, which has drastically rearranged the social metabolic process in the form of commodity exchange mediated by money. This process has changed the way people work and create home(s) in specific relations to the environment and, by doing so, producing people who perceive themselves as individuals separated from each other and from the nature. As a subjectivity that has systemically lost its sense of ecological and social interdependence, homo economicus has exploited both humans and the surrounding environment, confronting the crisis of a planet that has lost its homeostasis.

If so, however, how do we address the current crisis that threatens the planet, i.e. the commons for all, while we are still in the system that produces metabolic rift? The possibility of change may lie in the fact that we now cannot help but recognize what Hardin (1968) calls the "ruin of the commons" in the most corporeal sense. The ongoing and multiple crises are forcing us to see that collapse of the system that has created and accumulated crises within it through multiple metabolic rifts. The ecological crises and the interventions of non-human actors also expose the connections we have erased in the most violent ways, making a mockery of the idea that humans still rule the world. The changing material conditions have led to philosophical and discursive shifts: philosophies that emphasize the deep entanglements of different agents, human and non-human; new languages for grasping the inseparability of ontology, epistemology, and practice; and anthropological works that reveals relational and plural worlds (see Barad, 1998; Castro, 2016; Graeber and Wengrow, 2021; Latour, 2013). The concept of the commons as metabolism resonates with these philosophical and anthropological studies that struggle to overcome the epistemological divides. It not only allows us to comprehensively understand the current polycrisis, but also provides valuable practical tools for reconstructing relational subjects that restore and catalize social metabolism



by commoning labor and home(s), thus rebuilding the connectedness of the world.

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