

**Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, Translated by Matthew MacLellan (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). 475 pp. Paperback \$17.30.**

Emerging out of a think tank, convened between 2010 and 2012, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval's *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, first published in French in 2014, offers a theoretical consolidation of the political principles implicit in the different commoning movements that have arisen since the 1990s. It forwards, they attest, "a new reason of the common" (9), capable of "overthrowing" contemporary neoliberal "norms" (2) that seek to effectively "metabolize reality itself" (87).

Following a short Introduction that posits a contemporary 'tragedy of the non-common' against Garrett Hardin's persistently influential but discredited 'tragedy of the commons,' Dardot and Laval divide their book's content into three parts totaling nineteen chapters. The first chapter, "Archaeology of the Common," stands on its own. It makes a case for a universal conception of 'the common,' grounded in a praxis of human co-activity. The true 'common,' they ultimately elaborate, is any non-proprietary resource, created "through the transformation of that which already exists" (326), that is governed by moral rules, social practices, or legal norms, determined through constructive conflict (217) as much as through cooperative decision making, by those who govern and use and maintain it. It is, furthermore, legalized or 'instituted,' as "the common is first and foremost a matter of law, and therefore a determination of what must be. The challenge...is to substitute a new law by rejecting the claims of the old law. In this sense...it is a confrontation of *law against law*" (155). Dardot and Laval's conception of 'the common' is distinguished as much by what it is not or cannot be, as by what it is or must be. In this respect most 'leftists' or 'progressives' will regard their reasons for denying 'common' status to certain candidates as sound, among them: rent-based 'corporate commons' (119-133); Marxist notions of "the objective production of the common by capital" (51); the idea that some forms of knowledge or information are inherently 'common' (107, 112); or the insistence that 'the common' is "immanent to the social" (155), or otherwise ontological (189) or existential (190).

Potentially contentious may be their further denials of 'common' status to English common or customary law, which remains the purview of elite experts who select laws based on their compatibility with the principle and practice of private property (155-156), or to reifications of things whose natures are held to be inherently 'common' (11-12, 20), or to certain technologies considered in themselves to possess qualities or capacities for reorganizing society (118). Also controversial

will be their unorthodox but well-reasoned denial of ‘common’ status to the category or institution of ‘the public,’ to the extent that both continue to be defined in contradistinction to ‘the private’ (93) and to the extent that both remain insufficiently democratized and thus statist (155, 349) or bureaucratic (86, 356).

Radical or unrealizable as they be in the eyes of some, these delineated delimitations and principled prohibitions arguably proceed, as a matter of rational course, from Dardot and Laval’s central premise: that a new model of society, derived from and sustained by a new meta-principle of which ‘the common’ remains the most promising and viable on offer, can and must establish a new ‘reason,’ capable of undoing and ‘overthrowing’ the contemporary neoliberal order.

Beneath *Common’s* theoretical offerings lies something additionally substantive that must also command its readers’ attention: an expansive outline and analysis of ancient, medieval, and modern historical developments that together bear directly on the origins and evolution of the European idea and practice of ‘the common.’ The book’s first part, “The Emergence of the Common,” for instance, outlines the modern segment of these developments, reconstructing and critiquing the histories of the communist idea and state communism (Chapter 2); the period of the post-1980 neoliberal-era ‘new global commons enclosures’ (Chapter 3); post-WWII American inquiry into different types of ‘goods,’ which culminates in the liberal neo-institutionalist political economy research of Eleanor Ostrom, whose work documents successful examples of non-state, non-market, rule-based common pool resource, governance (Chapter 4); and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s early twenty-first-century attempts at translating “a theory of the *commons* into a theory of the *common* [italics in the original]” (32).

*Common’s* second part then goes still further back, recovering classical, medieval, and modern aspects of the history of the law and the institution of the common, including, but by no means limiting itself to, (Chapter 6) Ancient Greek conceptions of ‘commoning’ as an activity (*koinônein*) and ‘the common’ as an institution (*koinón*); Ancient Roman distinctions between the Public Domain, State Property, and *Res Nullius*, or the ‘unappropriable’; (Chapter 7) the discontinuous history of English Common Law, in which ‘custom’ functions as a site of conflict rather than of certainty; (Chapter 8) the “irreducible heterogeneity of the customs of the poor” in early modern Europe, and the notion that their legal foundations lay in productive ‘activity’; and (Chapter 9) the complex and primarily French mid-nineteenth to early twentieth-century customary and institutional construction of *de facto* workers’ commons. Chapter 10, which belongs to the book’s second part, then uses ideas developed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Cornelius Castoriadis to transcend sociology’s Comte-inspired “Reduction of the Institution to the Instituted,” by reasoning an “Instituent Praxis,’ whose bases, as previously noted, lie in a ‘Co-Institution of Rules.’

Notwithstanding its depth and breadth, *Common* is by no means free of weaknesses. Some are technical: its font is excessively small and conceals the book’s

true length, which far exceeds its official page count; its table of contents leaves out the book's clarifying chapter sub-headings; it lacks both a bibliography and an index. Other weaknesses are analytical. Might its conception of 'the common' be judged excessively constructivist, or insufficiently materialist? Does the book's primary focus on elaborating a 'reason' contrary to neoliberalism mean that it targets the wrong adversary, or merely one of a potential number that must ultimately be addressed *in tandem*? Further, though driven by a powerful and scintillating intelligence, does its seemingly secular spirit bear the implicit imprint of a decidedly French, and thus conceivably *provincial*, rationalism? Still other weaknesses, or perhaps oversights or omissions, could be said to be praxiological in nature. Dardot and Laval communicate nothing concrete as to how 'the common' is to be instituted in a world in which legal services are overwhelmingly beyond the financial reach of most individuals and groups.

Moreover, their conception of commoning as co-decision and co-activity appears to depend on making a premature processual leap over practical pedagogical questions concerning the education and consciousness formation of would-be commoners. Given its demanding theoretical and historical content, the sustained engagement of which approximates challenges associated with completing an advanced graduate level university course, this gap in *Common* is odd and unusual. Further, they remain largely silent throughout their book's many pages about questions concerning commoning and technology.

Nonetheless, despite these concerns *Common* remains a book of singular value, possessed of many virtues: an impeccable structure; remarkable lucidity; rigorous scholarship; patiently sustained theoretical argument; and profound historical and geographical scope. Besides, Matthew MacLellan's translation of it offers English readers a special boon: effective access to the large and troublingly untranslated French and Italian literatures Dardot and Laval consistently engage with and cite. In his preface to *Common* the Canadian scholar and thinker Imre Szeman declares the work "possibly the best account of the communal idea that exists in a single book" (x). A year later, there is little reason to doubt that his estimation continues to hold true.

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