



# COMMONS NOW

Latin-American spells for Collective Action

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To all the people who generously told me their stories.  
To social, popular, indigenous, rural workers  
and Afro-diasporic movements in Latin America.  
Those who remain alive, and those who lost their  
lives in defense of the Commons.  
To the ones that day after day build worlds  
and create realities. To guardians, caregivers  
and weavers of people, memories and life.  
To the enchanted ones. To the mysteries.  
To those who believe and those who act.  
To the wind, water, fire, earth and air.

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“Indigenous and black epistemes and cosmologies – a leap into enchantment (if the feet are well-grounded). Non-Eurocentric ways of perceiving and narrating the world grant us ancestral knowledge, perception of the present and imaginations for a future untied from the colonial knot.

They are systems, languages, materialities and movements with which we can deepen our knowledge.

It is impossible to develop oneself without the use of your own resources, as the Burkinabe philosopher Joseph Ki-Zerbo once said.

Here, development is linked to the idea of making the best use of what we have, aiming to fructify and not exhaust it.”<sup>1</sup>

Luciane Ramos da Silva

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<sup>1</sup>Luciane Ramos Silva. Knowing yourself, Enchanting Yourself. In: Instituto Procomum. (DES)Fazenda: o fim do mundo como o conhecemos. Instituto Procomum, 2020. Available at: <<https://issuu.com/institutoprocomum/docs/desfazenda>>. Accessed on: 22 September 2021.>



It's also because we can see that the trees are growing.

Yes, it's a very meaningful image. Because it stirs a lot of emotion. Because it's emotional to go back to places where, because of the pandemic, we could almost swear there would no longer be trees.

Because the land was not rich enough for them to grow. It hasn't been raining a lot, I mean, in our minds we had an image, a disastrous picture of the place.

And going back there, and seeing that they were much taller than us, was very emotional. Your skin vibrates again and you say "Oh, let's do this for another year! Shall we?"

I.E, Mexican activist, earth guardian and beekeeper

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# 1. PRESENTATION

If it is true that we do not see a way out of an economic system which enables the concentration of income and power in the hands of a few, this logic of exclusion, inequality and scarcity produces forms of existence that support the life of the majority. These are technologies of coexistence and collective organization that deserve visibility and acknowledgement. This work reunites stories, practices and thoughts which gather a repertoire of possibilities, of ways we can organize ourselves collectively to build a place which allows all living beings the right to life in all of its completeness.

In this work, this set of political practices and learnings of **collective structures of organization, ways of collectively connecting and addressing needs and problems, we will call the Commons, which we will together investigate further in this text.**

This is a work written by a person who believes that changes are possible and that they also frequently happen in the present, presence and practically. But that is only possible based on collective action, which **faces two main connected challenges. The first is the decollectivisation of the action:** our imagination has been so captured that we cannot even think of possibilities and solutions out of an individual trajectory, of either consumption or the bureaucratic relation of the State. **The second challenge is that believing and choosing collective action does not make it less complex and full of contradictions.**

The year is 2021, and we are living in a world with simultaneous crises and generalized collapses. Everything is at stake, including scientific knowledge, political institutions and, some would say, human existence itself. In fact, **almost** everything is at stake: the financial system and wealth accumulation by an oligarchy are thriving. According to a 2021 Oxfam report of Oxfam<sup>3</sup> the thousand biggest millionaires of the world took only nine months to see their fortunes return to pre-pandemic levels, while the recovery of the poorest could take over a decade. Moreover, gender violence and unemployment among women has grown and, until today, black and poor people die more frequently of Covid-19, an illness which at this point already has a vaccine. Furthermore, the latter, in Brazil and in other Latin American countries, are overwhelmingly non-white. Meanwhile, the 10 richest people in the world, all white men, have gathered

<sup>3</sup> Oxfam. The Inequality Virus. Available at: <<https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/inequality-virus>>. Accessed on: 21 September 2021.

around US \$500 billion since the pandemic began, an amount which is more than enough to pay for vaccines against Covid-19 for the world's entire population. I could follow-up with data that expresses stories of centenary injustices reflected in violences systematically reproduced and many interrupted lives.

It is not possible to talk about the past, present or future without talking about colonial terror, which is ongoing to this day. The history of primitive accumulation, which enabled the industrialization of European countries, cannot be understood in its integrity if we do not take into consideration the point of view of those who were dehumanized, enslaved, colonized, annihilated and had their land invaded and pillaged. The indigenous people who inhabited Latin America - long before the land was called as such - continue having to defend themselves not only from their local governments, but also from exploitation and enclosure by publicly traded multinational companies and alliances between the State and market players.

From Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>4</sup> I learned that privilege is a form of insulating oneself, to which I add ignorance. The more privileged one is, the less one can perceive the world, or widen it. The Standpoint Theory<sup>5</sup> perspective of analysis created by black feminist academics such as Patricia Hill Collins, proposes that when we listen to people at the bottom of social hierarchies who were historically marginalised, we are more capable of understanding the world. Thus, in this work, which bases itself on the experiences and knowledge of those who are not usually heard, is a way to build the Commons we defend. The stories that are presented here compose points of view and experiences that are not intended to be totalizing, but which outline and weave collective and communitary<sup>6</sup> experiences of organization.

Even with so much violence and injustice, there is life. And much, much wisdom. This work treads through these places of experience, existence, enchantment and resistance that not only oppose themselves to violence and inequalities provoked by a neoliberal system, but which, by existing, **build other realities. By diving into eight collective experiences in Latin America, I listened to stories of worlds where many worlds fit.**

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The Intervention Interview. Southern Humanities Review, Auburn, v. 22:4, fall 1988, p. 323-342.

<sup>5</sup> Standpoint Theory. Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standpoint\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standpoint_theory)>. Accessed on: 28 September 2021.

<sup>6</sup> I'm aware of different distinctions and meanings of community. For the purpose of this work collectivity and community are used in similar ways to refer to a group of people that are bonded together for political and affective reasons.





I place the practices compiled in this work as an antithesis of colonial terror: they are humanizing practices, beauty builders. I do not intend to dig deeper into theories of colonialism in their many approaches, such as post-colonial, decolonial or decolonizing. The proposal is to present ways of existing in the world which divert from the “single thought” of the capitalist monoculture, and that are based on anti-hegemonic practical concepts. Ways which emphasize the power of everyday politics and acting as a community: Commons, prefigurative politics, Bem Viver (Good-Living), Quilombolismo, Axé, macumba.

In the interviews I carried out, I met a diversity of structures, practices and ways of understanding the world which **showed me worlds that already exist and are being created and generated at every moment, here and now.**

I invite all of us, those who are unsatisfied with the world and want to provoke change and those who are already doing so, to inspire ourselves with the learnings shared and throw ourselves more to experimentalism and collective ways of production and reproduction of life and political engagement.

**In our context and experiences, what presents do these practices inspire and what futures do these experiences point to? What can we learn from them?**

## 2. INTRODUCTION

To write this text, I listened to nine people that are part of eight different collective experiences. They are leaders and participants of movements, organizations and groups organized to act towards the promotion of rights of indigenous peoples, rights to housing, rights of women and black women, rights to and protection of land, rights to food sovereignty and subsistence. Collective and community experiences that build realities and possibilities of existence in an existing economic and social system that works for very few.

Most interviewees are women and they live in Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Argentina and Mexico. Their ages vary between 28 and 61 years old. They are people who dedicate their lives to working collectively to solve problems and common needs and while doing so, also fight inequalities and transform realities. In the conversations carried out, I was especially interested in understanding their motivations, challenges and ways of organizing themselves, solving conflicts and making collective decisions.

Besides the fight and the defense of social and human rights, these practices invent ways of existing and organizing which antecede the idea of rights itself, prefigurating a possible life. By making certain choices in ways of living, these collectives make way for learnings and expansion of worlds that generate new choices and learnings, in a circular movement which is anchored in action and practice.

Thus, we find the presence of the concept of Prefigurative Politics, used in analyses of social movements and activism. As proposed by Carl Boggs (1977) and deepened by Marianne Maeckelbergh (2011), the expression refers to the search for a political practice in which wanting to change macro-politics is not enough, if we do not look at our own relations and ways of acting in our day to day lives. This close way of doing politics, understanding life, permeates the entire work.

To help widen the repertoires and analyses, I created a dialogue with the experiences I heard with thoughts, theories and cosmologies which enabled the opening of different paths to the current neoliberal ideology.

Setting the conversation in the Latin-American context, the invitation is to look at philosophies and epistemic proposals which are not alternatives

per se, as they are the life itself of many people. In this sense, I briefly approach Bem Viver (Good-Living), Quilombismo and Axé as organizing systems which significantly help us to realize we can and should try hard to expand our vision on the many ways of living and our experience with them.

I present the US American Elinor Ostrom (1990), with her institutionalist approach of governance of common goods, which contributed significantly by affirming, after years of empiric work, that resources collectively managed can be much more successful if they are governed by local communities, without the need of a centralized top-down power or external private agent.

Based on Ostrom, but broadening references, the activists Silke Helfrich and David Bollier (2019), respectively German and US American, contribute with systematizations made based on practical examples and categories connected to Commons organizations, which according to them, every day more people use to emancipate themselves from a predatory binary system of Market/State, convoking them to assume control of their lives.

From Mexico, Raquel Gutierrez (2015) offers us a thought regarding Commons based on her activism with Latin-American indigenous and social movements, sharing a Commons guided by popular and collective fights in defense of territories, but which also permanently supports life based on communitary networks.

The French writers Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2017) suscite the Commons as a revolution which generates new democratic forms, as an alternative to the global rationality built by neoliberalism. Based on this proposition, we can refer to the Commons as an organization of anti-capitalist struggles and a collective way of governing resources, as well as a **proposal of a political agenda**.

The text is divided in the Presentation, this Introduction and in 6 other parts: Methodological notes, in which I present the criteria I used to carry out interviews and theoretical dialogues, in addition to presenting a short profile of each interviewee. In Commons Thinking, I present the main theoretical interlocutions and philosophical inspirations which guided me in this process. In Commons in Action, I delve deeper into each experience, to give the reader

more context. In four lessons on collective organization for social transformation, I systematize what I consider to be the main learnings and, at last, I come to a possible Commons Future and finish with the References consulted in this work.

I believe that the set of practices of Commons in Action and Commons Thinking prefigure a way of coexisting in a world that makes us believe that only one possible way of existing is valid and which is dictated by economic and material wealth accumulation - which is ever more restricted to very few, as aforementioned - based on ideas that development is a straight line, a result of economic progress, supported by ideas of a Market which autoregulates itself and a State which takes care of the rest<sup>7</sup>. I add my voice to the many voices which have challenged and which continue to challenge this logic.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Friedman, journalist and columnist for The New York Times, an important ideologist of global market capitalism, wrote the excerpt transcribed below in 1999, in which he presents a cake recipe for neoliberalism, arguing that this way of life would be "one-size-fits-all": "Thomas Friedman, journalist and columnist for The New York Times, an important ideologue of global market capitalism, wrote the excerpt transcribed below in 1999, in which he presents a cake recipe for neoliberalism, arguing that this way of life would be "one-size-fits-all": "When it comes to the question of which system is most effective in raising living standards, the historical debate is over. The answer is free market capitalism [...]. When your country recognizes this fact, when it recognizes the rules of the free market in today's global economy, and decides to abide by them, it puts on what I call the Golden Straitjacket. The Golden Straitjacket is the defining political economic garment of this globalization era [...]. Thatcher and Reagan have combined to take large chunks of decision-making economics out of the state, Great Society advocates, and traditional Keynesian economics, and hand them over to the free market. (...) Unfortunately, this Golden Straitjacket is pretty much "one size fits all." So it pinches certain groups, squeezes others and keeps a society under pressure to constantly streamline its economic institutions and upgrade its performance. It leaves people behind quicker than ever if they shuck it off, and it helps them catch up quicker than ever if they wear it right. It is not always pretty or gentle or comfortable. But it's here and it's the only model on the rack this historical season." Excerpt from The Golden Straitjacket Friedman, T. (2000). The Golden Straitjacket. In The Lexus and the Olive Tree (pp. 101-111). New York, NY. Anchor Books.

## 3. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

How to defend other forms of life in the face of so many defeats and failures? We are part of a system that privileges the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of few and limits our capacity of dreaming, of imagining new ways and believing that a fair and equal world is possible. But there are those who believe, work, think and engage themselves even with the failure and defeats, or even, because of this. Thus, I wanted to ask these people who build communities and collective organizations involved with change, how and why they organize themselves, which rules are created, how do they solve conflicts, in search of answers and possible categories which could help other people and organizations. To dialogue with them, I brought concepts and philosophies that expand our perception on the big totalizing theories.

After carrying out the interviews and theoretical readings, one of the main challenges was to produce categories and syntheses. The diversity is vast, and the learning and models are unique. Reinforcing what many researchers say, including Ostrom (1999), Gutierrez (2015), Helfrich and Bollier (2019): because they are social systems, all Commons are unique and situated; therefore, it is not possible to create patterns in advance. However, it is possible to propose paths of analysis, which is what I have done.

As I was not able to hear everyone I would like, I chose to make a cutout which took into consideration the diversity of profiles, contexts, territories, experiences and purposes, as well as mixing rural and urban experiences. The availability of time in the moment of interviews also influenced the trajectory. They mostly happened in the first semester of 2021.

As the work is a result of my participation in the program of fellows 2020/2021 of Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity, I had the deadline between February and September of 2021 to elaborate and finish this text. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and geographic distance, the interviews were carried out in a virtual manner on a videoconference platform, having been recorded and subsequently transcribed.

My desire was to print in newspapers and magazines around the world the faces and stories of each one, but, together with the program's coordination I chose to maintain the anonymity of the participants in this work. I made this choice so it would be possible to create a space of trust for the interviewees and to enable the approach of conflicts, limits and many difficulties that permeate

the collectives. I do not discard the continuity of this work in other formats in the near future, but, for now, I will use their initials to indicate what they said.

Beside is a table with some information regarding each interviewee.



Interviewee	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Main Occupation	Nationality
L.H.		Woman	White	Academic facilitator	Germany
I.E.	36	Woman	Mestiza	Activist, guardian, beekeeper	Mexico
C.S.	61	Woman	Black	Leader of a social de movement, activist, politician	Brazil
J.G.	34	Woman	Black	Activist	Brazil
C.P.	36	Woman	White	Academic, activist	Argentina
W.P.	60	Man	Indigenous	indigenous leader, defensor of the environment	Peru
L.P.	36	Woman	Indigenous	Activist and indigenous leader	Colombia
I.W.	28	Woman	White	Activist associated of a cooperative, graduate student, academic	Brazil
M.L.	50	Woman	Black	Communitary leader	Brazil

## 4. COMMONS THINKING

*“Either we listen and talk with other voices or we silence ourselves forever.”<sup>8</sup>  
Luiz Antonio Simas and Luiz Rufino*

*Looking to one side, looking to the other, and seeing a sea of women just like us, a sea, on the horizon were black women, I couldn't see where the march ended, where it started and where it ended, you couldn't see (the end). And this had a very big impact on my subjectivity and on the subjectivity of many women who were there... The women who were able to stop for two seconds to look had an irreversible impact, in this sense of recognizing and understanding the power that we are and that in fact we are so many.*

*J. G.*

This quote is from one of the interviewees of this work, a black woman activist from Brazil. I start with the image she describes, which indicates the potency of recognizing oneself in many. In this part of the work, I will make approximations between concepts and practices that are part of proposing Commons as a form of collective organization that improves and changes the world as it takes place.

Here, Commons will be used in the sense of commoning extracted from the phrase “there is no commons without commoning”; by historian Peter Linebaugh (2009). In Portuguese, commoning has no proper translation and I usually translate it as “there is no commons without communion”. To it, I add, from time to time, that there is no commons without walking (caminhar, in portuguese), adding the sense of movement, in addition to the sense of commuting and sharing.

**In addition to a prefigurative form of organization, in this work, Commons will be used as a verb that does not exist on its own, but only in relation. A practical and conceptual alliance that gathers elements of political economy, Prefigurative Politics of anti-globalization movements, feminist practices and theories, especially black feminists, indigenous and Afro-diasporic thinkers and philosophers, and communal forms of popular organization in Latin-America.**

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<sup>8</sup>Extract from the book Flecha no tempo, by Luiz Antonio Simas and Luiz Rufino.

Raquel Gutierrez, a mathematician, philosopher, sociologist and Mexican activist says that weaving communities, that is, building the Commons, implies cultivating proximity and managing distances. Her reflection brings out a key element: building community is not about liking everyone or thinking alike. Gutierrez was part of important moments in the Latin American continent. She participated in the founding of the Aymara Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army (EGTK) in Bolivia, was imprisoned for five years and was directly involved in the so-called Water War, a popular uprising in defense of water as a common good that took place in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in the 2000s. A landmark that, as well as the emergence of the Zapatista Movement, still influences popular struggles and their imagination not only in Latin America. Today, Raquel is a professor and researcher at the Autonomous University of Puebla (Mexico) and is one of the coordinators of the group Community Networks and Forms of the Politics, whose two editions of the journal *El Apantle* were important dialogues in this investigation.

**Gutierrez's Commons is a political act from the indigenous and popular communities of Latin America.** Her investigation focuses on the recurrent struggles that have taken place and continue to take place and which sought to establish limits to the expropriating and privatizing action of the most powerful capital. But she is also dedicated to efforts to register and research what works, to observe terms of social control of recovered or protected wealth – be it culture, memory, water, forest or hydrocarbons. In an interview with the newspaper *Página 12*, from 2013<sup>10</sup>, Raquel says: “[c]ommons is not a classifying category that refers to property, but it is a central idea-force in the reorganization of social conviviality”. A perspective of social transformation that seeks to dislocate the centrality of the state and put the reproduction of life back at the centre of the political discourse.

I understand that reflecting on conviviality is essential for us to think of a democratic world built on differences, not one that annihilates them. To live together is to need to make decisions and establish conversations and negotiations. Negotiating is understood here as the symbolic exchange

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<sup>9</sup> The first edition, *Común para qué?* *El Apantle* – Revista de Estudios Comunitarios, n. 1, out. 2015, is available on: <<https://horizontescomunitarios.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/elapantle.pdf>>. Accessed on: 22 September 2021. The second edition *¿Común cómo? Lógicas y situaciones El Apantle* – Revista de Estudios Comunitarios, n.2, 2016, is available on <https://horizontescomunitarios.wordpress.com/2017/07/31/el-apantle-ii-comun-como-logicas-y-situaciones/>

<sup>10</sup> Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar. Reconstruir el sentido común disidente. Available at: <<https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elmundo/4-222975-2013-06-25.html>>. Accessed on: 24 September 2021.

of giving-receiving-returning, open to encounter and struggle in diversity, as proposed by Muniz Sodré in *Pensar Nagô* (Thinking Nagô). In this book, Sodré refers to the Nagô philosophy as a “negotiation” philosophy, adding that the Nagôs<sup>11</sup>, similar to the ancient Hellenes, were always great traders.

As C. S. tells us,

**There are two types of politics: there's the party and institutionalised politics and the politics of living, right? What solves things is this politics [of living], because you have to do politics, you have to know how to negotiate, you have to know the moment you retreat, you have to know the moment you enter, you have to articulate.**

Much of the dominant economic thinking that determines global economic policies is based on the belief that human beings are incapable of cooperating to manage a given resource or process and to thus produce solutions. That is why the work of the first woman and one of the only two women to have won the Nobel Prize in Economics (2009), Elinor Ostrom, is so important.

Daughter of the Great Depression in the United States (1929), Ostrom was born in 1933 in Los Angeles and grew up learning to grow vegetables in her backyard and sewing clothes for soldiers going to war. She was the first in her family to attend a university and made a career in Political Science, paving the way, together with her partner Vincent Ostrom, for a network of researchers who, instead of writing about economics closed in their offices, went out into the field to listen to and observe people, live among them and collect empirical data on how communities self-organized around activities such as water management, grazing or fishing activities, where resources were shared by a particular group of people. Her research group and the association<sup>12</sup> she founded are still active today.

The US-American researcher challenged a consensus – deeply ingrained at the time, and still today, among economists, legislators and politicians – that

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<sup>11</sup> According to Sodré, the term *nagô* corresponds to a cultural complex whose origins date back to Nigeria and Benin. “In historical and geographical terms, these nations came from the Costa da Mina (area that today encompasses Benin, Nigeria and Togo) and began to arrive at the Port of Salvador, Bahia, in the late 18th century, as an African exchange currency for the acquisition of tobacco produced in the Recôncavo region of Bahia.” (Sodré, 2017)

<sup>12</sup> International Association for the Study of the Commons – IASC Commons.

a given natural resource without regulation by the State or the Market would be used until its exhaustion. One of the most famous articles from this period is one by the ecologist Garret Hardin<sup>13</sup>, named The Tragedy of the Commons, published in 1968 in Science Magazine. Regarding this way of thinking, Ostrom (1990) wrote that researchers such as Hardin often wished to “invoke an image of helpless individuals caught in an inexorable process of destroying their own resources”. I understand that Hardin and other economists developed their theories from this assumption out of their ignorance of the lives of most people on the planet. Most people depend on resources and each other to survive. Interestingly, these premises have spread, and we are held hostage by obtuse thinking, in the most literal sense of the word, caused by assumptions based on limited experiences.

Elinor Ostrom went out into the field to produce research that demonstrated that such a tragedy, taken for granted, **did not happen in many cases, because the people involved built their own agreements and rules and were able to learn to cooperate over time.** More than that, she demonstrated that community-managed resources can be even more durable than the practices of nationalization or privatization.

Generally speaking, economists have recognized two mechanisms for dealing with problems related to well-being, scarcity and resource allocation: markets and states. Where markets fail, the state is brought in. Most economists prefer markets because they think states are inefficient in dealing with our economic needs. The notion of non-state, non-market economic activity is absent from most forms of economic analysis, but Elinor Ostrom researched it as a living reality. Her Nobel Prize talk was entitled “Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems” (Ostrom 2010). The fact that Ostrom focused on the economy beyond markets and states not as an overcoming or as a third way, but as a possibility, opens up keys to help us understand how to build solutions that can overcome this apparent dead end.

<sup>13</sup> Garrett James Hardin (April 21, 1915 – September 14, 2003) was a US-American ecologist who was weary of the dangers of human overpopulation. He is most known for his exposition of the tragedy of the commons, in a 1968 paper of the same title in Science, which called attention to “the damage that innocent actions by individuals can inflict on the environment”. He is also known for Hardin’s First Law of Human Ecology: “We can never do merely one thing. Any intrusion into nature has numerous effects, many of which are unpredictable.” He is listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a white nationalist, whose publications were “frank in their racism and quasi-fascist ethnonationalism.” With information of: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garrett\\_Hardin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garrett_Hardin)>. Accessed on: 23 September 2021.



Despite having won a Nobel Prize in Economics, Ostrom's school was Political Economy, and therefore she believed that economics is guided by institutions. Institutions can be understood as a set of rules. If the rules are defined by human beings, it makes no sense to say that the Market, the State or the Economic Policy are devoid of ideology. Ostrom won the Nobel for demonstrating how local properties can be successfully managed by local agents without regulation by central authorities or privatization.<sup>14</sup> This happened in 2009, a year after the biggest stock market crash in the United States, the centre of world capitalism, which gave rise to the biggest crisis in the global economy since the Great Depression of 1929.

The so-called crisis of 2008 was a consequence of the high levels of financial speculation that generated a real estate bubble in the US and a consequent undercapitalization of banks. It is constantly used as an example of how the economic machinery has completely detached itself from the materiality of people's lives. In this context the reaction of governments, even the most liberal ones who believe that the State should not intervene in the economy, especially in the US and Europe, was to offer large amounts of money to save the banks. Allied to these measures, the IMF pressed the countries' fiscal austerity policies to recover the economy, making the 2008 crisis the spark for many social movements that occupied the streets in the following years, such as Occupy Wall Street in the USA, the indignados in Spain and the anti-austerity protests in Greece.

Unlike Gutierrez, Elinor Ostrom did not use the concept of Commons as a space for political struggle, but as something of fundamental importance for the challenge of unique truths and the overcoming of binary thoughts (State-Market, private-public). **For her, institutional homogeneity is a threat to our survival as much as monoculture is to our biodiversity. "We need to overcome the trend of recommending panaceas and instead encourage considerable experimentation at various levels to reduce the threats of massive collapse of valuable resources."**<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Information available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2009/ostrom/facts/>. Accessed on: 24 september 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Ostrom, E. Why Do We Need to Protect Institutional Diversity?. European Political Science, n. 11, p. 128–147 (2012). Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2011.37>>. Accessed on: 22 September 2021.

As Joan Subirats points out, quoted by Rodrigo Savazoni in *The Commons Among Us*, for Ostrom, the Commons is, above all, a system of rights and obligations: “[b]ased on the accumulation and analysis of many cases, [Ostrom] managed to build a system of institutional rules and analysis that shows how an ecology of relationships is built that ultimately generates more incentives for cooperation between agents than competition”. One of her great contributions is the eight design principles for averting the tragedy of the Commons and promoting collective self-government, which I will examine again.

Commons are the bonds we build to continue being, to make life continue to be life. By proposing a dialogue with Latin-American commoners and thinkers, it is possible to glimpse a Commons that is Indigenous, Macumbeiro, Quilombista, adept at Amerindian philosophies such as Bem Viver (Good Living). Without intending to deepen these complex systems of experimenting, perceiving and thinking about the world, I briefly present some initial ideas to add to our circle of thoughts, an invitation to think about this path of collective construction for social change as an open path to movement, liberation and to the expansion of worlds. That is, not just forms of organization, but possibilities of existence and relationships with alterity.

## PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS, A PROXIMITY POLITICS

The concept of prefigurative politics was created by the US - American academic Carl Boggs (1977) to contrast new left organizations that emerged from the 1970s onwards with predecessor organizations and social movements that were inspired by the model of Soviet centralism. Like the Commons, it is a diffuse concept, which has been adopted by a number of researchers and activists and there is not always a consensus about its contours. In general, it is an expression that refers to social movements that started to value experiments with participatory democracy and the promotion of equity in the internal structures of collectivities as being as important as impacting the external agendas of the global economy. An action guided by the ethics of being the change we want to see in the world is part of building this world.

For Maeckelbergh (2011), citing Graeber, prefiguring politically aims to “reinvent life as a whole”. David Graeber, a well-known anarchist intellectual wrote in 2002, at the height of the anti-globalization movements, that “it is one thing to say: ‘Another world is possible’. It’s another to experience this world, even momentarily.”<sup>16</sup> Maeckelbergh argues that alter-globalization activists, who emerged in the late 1990s, rejected the distinction between activists and the public because it made them sound like a vanguard that would lead the masses to freedom. Or as Russell (2012) puts it, “[a]ctivists rejected what they considered the anti-leadership ethos of the 1960s. Instead, they insisted on the importance of building the leadership of the historically disadvantaged”.

By prioritizing the process, the daily practice and the promotion of equity as a process that never ends, I understand that the prefigurative politics helps us to bring another lens to the analysis. What would be the prefigurative forms of governance that inspire distribution of power and recognition? Prefiguring a Commons can be a form of community and democratic management not only of common resources, but of our own life, of our relationships. It can function as a response to the looting that we have been subjected to, from the colonial processes until today, by official bureaucracies and oligopolies, but also to land us in the practice of the ideals we project, starting from micropolitics to combat systemic inequalities that are also internal to collective processes.

## AXÉ

*In the sertão mom created me, her milk never suited me, Preta Bá was the one who breast-fed me, the son of mine and the son of my son. In the sertão, mom taught me that here I can build everything, daughter, you have Nagô’s blood, as does the entirety of this Brazil. Oiê, from my brothers of Angola Africa. Oiê to Moçambique-Congo Africa. Oiê for the bantu nation Africa. For the staff of Xangô and the caxangá of Oxalá, and Brazil asks Mother Africa’s blessing.”<sup>17</sup>*

<sup>16</sup> Available at < <https://newleftreview.org/issues/iii3/articles/david-graeber-the-new-anarchists>>. Tradução da autora. Accessed on 25 September 2021

<sup>17</sup> Mãe África, of Sivuca and Paulo César Pinheiro, sung by M. L. during the interview.

“How is it that we [the black population in Brazil] are alive, and we are 54% of the population, if the State policy is a policy of extermination of the black people? It’s because we share what we have, but it’s a sharing especially of axé, of vital energy”. This speech, by the researcher, writer and journalist Bianca Santana, one of the mentors of this work, in the video series A Lente do Comum,<sup>18</sup> in 2018, has never left my memory.

In Brazil, Axé is linked to Afro-Brazilian ancestry and religiosity of Yoruba influence, of black peoples brought enslaved from the West African coast. It is a force that is planted, built and transmitted. “Axé is the most important content of the terreiro. Without Axé, existence would be immobile, lifeless, deprived of its dynamics of carrying out the vital process. As a force, it is transmissible, it can be transmitted to objects and human beings. Everything that exists is only fully so through the acquisition of Axé” (SANTOS, 1988).

In the book *Flecha no tempo*, Simas and Rufino tell us that the culture of Axé is one that designates a way of relating to reality based on the belief in a vital energy that resides in each person, in the community, in sacred objects, food, in the elements of nature, in ritual practices, in the sacralization of bodies through dance, in the dialogue of bodies with drums, among other forms, and must be constantly fed, restored and exchanged so that it does not disperse.

Axé is present in some of the interviews carried out and refers to what unites us and at the same time what we share. It is a relational force, a creative power and also a philosophy. In *Pensar Nagô*, Muniz Sodré (2017) suggests that the arrows of Apollo, a Greek god, have an affinity with the arrows of the orixá Oxossi, as well as with the wisdom of Orunmilá. “In gaps, between the lines and even in scattered statements, it is possible to establish analogies with Afro procedures, in a methodological movement that we can describe as modulation, in the proper musical sense of the term, from one system to another.” In this work, I understand Axé as part of a system of knowledge, and not as an exotic and multiculturalist mysticism, often used for momentary consumption and mere static entertainment.

<sup>18</sup> The series of videos A Lente do Comum (The Lense of the Common) was produced by Procomum Institute. The complete list of videos, with subtitles, can be found on the available link: <<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLz535Y9iZdF55YaAX-Y25-kVlplBi4623a>>. Accessed on: 22 September 2021.



Evoking Axé is part of a search, albeit a panoramic one, for what is behind a situated and geographically located Commons in a land where much has happened. To evoke Axé is to propose, or at least ask, what the relationship is between the many forms of organization and of producing life with the exterminating force of colonial and patriarchal capitalism. **Or rather, it is to pose the question and rephrase it: how, despite all the suffering, violence and precariousness promoted, is so much knowledge, complexity and resistance possible?** In this work, I propose that there is much more between Catholic heaven and Eurocentric earth than the Greek philosophy.

**Consciousness itself is a process of continuous relationships between people. We are supremely isolated from the spiritual world, sometimes we don't believe in anything and that brings about emotional struggles, it hinders relationships, the way we see the world, even our ability to solve conflicts, because the spiritual world is so beautiful and is born precisely from the relationship with others, with the commons.**

L.P.

## QUILOMBISMO

“By proclaiming the bankruptcy of mental colonization, we celebrate the advent of quilombist liberation”.<sup>19</sup> The author of this statement, Abdias Nascimento, was one of the greatest Brazilian artists and intellectuals. He was an actor, painter, director, playwright and activist in the fight against racial discrimination and for the valorization of black culture.

Abdias developed the concept of Quilombismo, as a project for the social emancipation of black peoples, based on their own history and culture, confronting colonial narratives of denial or reduction of the African legacy to mere “exoticism”.

<sup>19</sup> Literafro. Abdias Nascimento. Quilombismo: um conceito científico histórico-social. Available at: <<http://www.letras.ufmg.br/literafro/autores/11-textos-dos-autores/1444-abdias-nascimento-quilombismo-um-conceito-cientifico-historico-social>>. Accessed on: 22 September 2021.

According to Danilo Luiz Marques, with the collaboration of Gabriel dos Santos Rocha, the history of the colonization of America and the Caribbean is replete with communities of fugitive slaves who fought against slavery. In Venezuela, it was the cumbes; in Colombia, the palenques; in Antigua, Jamaica, and the southern United States, it was the maroons; in some Caribbean regions, it was the maronage; in Puerto Rico and Cuba, they became known as Cimarronaje. In Brazil, these communities were first called mocambos and, later, quilombos. In all these regions, such experiences of freedom meant an affront to the slave institution, with the Quilombo de Palmares being the most emblematic example both in Brazil and in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Historian Beatriz Nascimento, in the article *O conceito de quilombo e a resistência cultural negra* (The concept of quilombo and black cultural resistance), states that, as a model of institution, the quilombo has the unique characteristics of its African model, more specifically present in Angola, in a pre-diaspora historical moment. Moreover, in the article, Beatriz characterises the quilombo model as a political practice of emancipation and reparation, as “[a] vigorous instrument in the process of recognizing black Brazilian identity for greater ethnic and national self-assertion. The fact that it existed as a breach in the system to which black peoples were morally submitted projects a hope that similar institutions can act in the present alongside various other manifestations of reinforcement of cultural identity”.

The ideas of Abdias and Beatriz are great inspiration for a large part of black social movements in Brazil today, claiming this place of possibility of collective organization based on the premises of memory, identity and resistance and values of justice and equality.

The presence of this perspective on quilombos and Quilombismo is found here as a contemporary reference for collective organizational models. Forged in resistance and survival, and under intense production of culture and memory, the peoples who were enslaved here challenge the hegemonic ways of thinking and understanding the world and of practicing living together and maintaining life.

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<sup>20</sup> Itaú Cultural. Abidias Nascimento. Available at: <<https://www.itaucultural.org.br/ocupacao/abdias-nascimento/ativista-e-artista/>> Accessed on: 22 September 2021.

## BEM VIVER (GOOD LIVING)

I know Bem Viver is something that in Colombia and Bolivia are related to the collective, but here we have had to learn this path for ourselves as well. In my Master's I seek to do just that, to gather some of the general lines of what Bem Viver would be for black women. And it is a lot, because it is this relation with the earth, with nature that for us leads to a discussion of reparation, of who has land in this Brazil, and who does not. It passes through the relations of quilombolas, through the relation of African origins - in Candomblé we say that without a leaf there is no axé, there is no Candomblé, so the leaf, nature, elements even the orixás are elements of Nature, they are representations of Nature. So there is this dimension, but there is also the dimension of our political exercise and the way we organize ourselves, how we treat each other. So for us this materializes itself in this working group of care, of us understanding that it needs to be an important and constant preoccupation with our humanities, taking care of ourselves, even of our agenda, thus understanding that Bem Viver brings with itself a project. *And what's the opposite of Bem Viver? It's what we live today, right?*

J. G.

I often wonder what would have happened if the colonizers, mainly the Spanish and Portuguese, had not exterminated the populations that had lived here and dehumanized the lives and culture of those who remained alive. What would have happened if they had mobilized themselves to expand their beliefs and learn from the philosophies and ways of life that were already here?

There are many civilizations that lived here and, still today, there are many indigenous peoples that coexist in most Latin American countries. Each of them has philosophies, beliefs, founding myths and forms of organization with which it is possible to dialogue, learn from and be inspired by. My call here is not to understand it as an “alternative” form of worldview, but as a possibility to question our own premises of what it means to live in society, and build a future based on prosperity, justice and equality.

The Wampis, indigenous people who live on the Peruvian Amazon border with Ecuador, in a document<sup>21</sup> that recovers the history of the construction of their process of autonomy and self-government of their territory, say that their objective in this process is actually the Tarimat Pujut (*buen vivir*, live gratefully, good living). This notion is shared by many indigenous cultures such as Sumak Kawsai, in Quechua, and Suma Qamaã, in Aymara.

Good Living, *Bem Viver* or *Buen Vivir*<sup>22</sup> is based on the belief that having a “good life” is only possible as part of a community, but community in a broader sense, including the oneness in the relationship with nature and with soul beings. This is so ingrained in indigenous cultures that there is a tradition shared between different nations that no one dies alone. Even when someone is dying, there is a collective perspective: “No one buries themselves alone.”

In *Conversatório sobre o Bem Viver*, Bolivian activist and intellectual Mario Rodríguez Ibáñez tells us that Bem Viver is not thought of as a paradigm of the future, but as a horizon that guides our journey today. Good Living gives us meanings, political and ethical horizons for work, but it does not clearly define the final project.

Therefore, the focus of *Bem Viver* is on the ancestor placed in the present, which builds and creates what comes. The possibility of transformation is fundamentally based on what exists, from our practices today that bring and contain the ancestral, in a movement, again, circular.

This **today** contains the possibilities of transformation that already take place in everyday life, disputing and coexisting, often within the same individual and a community, with projects of domination, **as domination is never absolute**. Even with the colonial and slave project, domination coexists with other ways of life, **but it depends on how we are going to act politically and socially so that what already is, exists – and continues to be**.

From the 2000s onwards, many social and anti-globalization movements were influenced by the notion of Bem Viver as an inspiration of imagination and political practice. A cosmivision of the Andean peoples, but also a philosophical proposal for understanding the journey, challenging the idea of a point of arrival.

As Raúl Zibechi (2015) reminds us, *la comunidade no es, se hace* (the community is not something, it is made). Every day, through the collective work of men and women, girls, boys and the elderly, who, working together, make up the community, make the Commons.

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<sup>21</sup> Available at <<https://porlatierra.org/docs/de6c4f4e2400ee243f7cecd33ea44b8.pdf>>. Accessed on 25 September 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Bem Viver here follows the explanation of Tadeu Breda, translator of the Portuguese edition of Alberto Acosta's book, *O Bem Viver: uma oportunidade para imaginar outros mundos* (*O Bem Viver: an opportunity to imagine other worlds*): “‘Bom Viver’ is the translation that most respects the term used by the author (*Buen Vivir*) and also the term in Kichwa (*sumak kawsay*), the language from which the concept was born in its Ecuadorian version. According to the *Shimiyukkamu Kichwa-Spanish Dictionary*, published by the Casa de Cultura of Ecuador in 2007, *sumak* translates as beautiful, precious, exquisite, excellent; *kawsay*, like life. In other words, *buen* and *sumak* are originally adjectives, as well as “*bom*” – their best synonym in Portuguese, in this case. *Vivir* and *sumak*, in turn, are subjects. However, in view of the term used for some years by Brazilian social movements, we decided to translate the title of the book as *O Bem Viver*, considering “*well*” as an adverb and “*living*” as a verb.”



# 5. COMMONS IN ACTION

## EIGHT LATIN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCES

TO PARTICIPATE IS TO BE PRESENT  
A NETWORK OF MULTI-AGENT NETWORKS  
FOR THE PROTECTION AND RECONSTRUCTION  
OF COMMONING IN MEXICO

The conversation with I.E. and L.H. was my only interview carried out with two people. I met L.P. at an academic event about Commons. She is German and for a few years has been living in Mexico. She is a facilitator of collective processes and a researcher. When I asked if I could interview her, she applied to the collective, then agreed and brought I. along. I., 36, is Mexican, an activist and works for a non-governmental organization. Both have played the role of articulators and caretakers of a network of networks assembled around a protected natural area in southern Mexico since 2015. Over time, however, the group – composed of academics, non-governmental organizations, activists, artists, rural workers and a variety of organizations – realized that there was more to it than a legal decree protecting an environmental area, the connection and protection of that territory also had a lot to say about how to organize ourselves and to live. The collectivity and coordination to give meaning to the territory is the Commons shared by the members of the network.

Let's say we mainly dedicated the first year to probe what could be done. Understand a little what is there, tour it a few times, so that, in 2016, we would be able to launch a whole research process. A collaborative action to map the territory, the agents, and to begin structuring mobile groups, which would be organized collectively, in an assembly. So I joined that process, which was part of a project that also was financed, and which contributed to that initial impulse.

I.E



As the network became more dynamic, other initiatives were born, such as a cinema club, a network of solidarity economy, a network designed to restore and intervene in the landscape, and a group that studies and develops legal tools for the protection of the territory. All of the initiatives are voluntary and most of the participants are women. In the network, women represent 100% of the participants in the articulator/caretaker group, which ideally would operate in a rotation system, but not enough people have volunteered to participate. Every year, planning and evaluation meetings take place and also, more recently, a meeting called Utopias in which people from the various networks that make up the collective were able to meet to dream collectively and individually for the next 30 years. The network does not necessarily have a formal structure, although there are some written rules, agreements and the search for horizontality and self-management.

### OUR MAIN CRITERIA IS PARTICIPATION A MOVEMENT THAT FIGHTS FOR HOUSING AND FOR THE RIGHT TO THE CITY IN BRAZIL

C. S., 61, is the main leader of a Brazilian housing movement that has existed for 21 years. In addition to being a major leader in the movement, she is also an important political figure, having, in recent years, run for office in the legislative branch. In Brazil, the housing shortage affects 33 million people (2018), most of whom are black women.<sup>23</sup> C.S. and the movement she is part of act on issues of basic necessities, such as people's right to have a roof over their heads, in addition to focusing on influencing public policies, legislation, participating in public hearings, as well as promoting access to culture and advocating for a political agenda built on a broader foundation of equality and diversity. This is also evidenced by the diversity of profiles found in the movement's participants and allies.

<sup>23</sup> Labcidade. Larissa Lacerda, Isadora Guerreiro e Paula Freire Santoro. Por que o déficit habitacional brasileiro é feminino. Available at: <<http://www.labcidade.fau.usp.br/por-que-o-deficit-habitacional-brasileiro-e-feminino/>>. Accessed on: 22 sep. 2021.>

Today, the movement's profile is very wide-ranging: those who need to fight for housing, to guarantee their rights, and when I talk about housing I am talking about the gateway to other rights, but also those who come to be activists in a political fight, to play the role of multipliers, of trainers, so they are diverse. Diversity is our foundational logic.

Another important aspect of C.S.'s experience is the emphasis on the necessity of institutionalism and formalization procedures to legitimize the movement, both inward, through the outlining of clear rules, and outward. This aspect is not featured as emphatically in other experiences.

In order to legitimize a movement, it's not enough to simply take a piece of paper, a cloth, a flag, slap on an acronym and call it a movement. An organized movement has a statute, it has a CNPJ, it pays taxes, it has all its due certificates and even more, which the society doesn't even know about. A movement, to say that it is fighting for the right to have housing, has to effectively participate in a dialogue with the government.

This can also be related to the criminalization of social movements in Brazil. Both C.S. and members of her family have been accused and imprisoned for extortion and later acquitted for lack of evidence.

WE ARE OPEN TO WELCOME  
AND LEARN WITH THESE WOMEN  
A CONTEMPORARY BLACK FEMINIST  
COLLECTIVE IN BRAZIL

J.G. is a journalist and black feminist activist. In addition, J. works in the office of a black Brazilian legislator. She is one of the leaders behind a state chapter marked by a national movement that emerged in 2015 around the Black and Afro-Caribbean Women's Day celebrations. The event drew attention to the condition of black women, and at the same time it promoted their ideas for a better society. Black women represent about 25% of the Brazilian population and, according to all social indexes, comprise the most vulnerable social group in the country.

It is always very important to talk about structural racism, about how patriarchy affects black women who are in a place of subservience, who suffer from the sexualization of their bodies, from labour precarity and all those things. And at the same time, to say: well, that's what happens, but we have a project for society, we have a project for the country aiming precisely at radically changing what we are seeing, what we are experiencing and what we are feeling in our bodies.

Because it was created around the organization of an event, the movement has the important role of a gateway, of being a space for the formation and political awakening of black women who are not necessarily part of other similar spaces. Over the years, the movement has acknowledged itself as something bigger, beyond the event, and therefore started developing work groups, rules and expanding its advocacy agenda. An important aspect highlighted by J. is that the movement is also a space that provides recognition, belonging and care. In short, a real revolution.

WHEN I LOOK AT MY COMMUNITY,  
I SEE A LITTLE PIECE OF AFRICA  
A LEADER AND HER COMMUNITY IN THE PROTECTION  
OF A TERRITORY IN THE NORTHEAST OF BRAZIL

M.L. is a community leader. She works for the protection of territories and for the promotion of rights in a capital in the Northeast of Brazil. According to her, her social awareness, her racial and cultural identity and her sense of community were inherited from her father, who came from "a family more connected with its African and indigenous roots, a very powerful culture with traits carried by dad in his body", but also from the Catholic basic ecclesial communities, related to Liberation Theology, that were very relevant in Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s and were recognized for their participative and democratic methods. "They even taught us to be critical of them." Nowadays M.L. practices Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion, and is on her way to become a mãe de santo, a spiritual leader of Afro-Brazilian religions (mães de santo, "mother of saints", and pais de santo, "father of saints"). In our conversation, earthly and spiritual elements coexisted.

The region where ML was born and still lives today is known for its pottery craftsmanship. Most of the community's houses were built by the residents themselves, brick by brick. About ten years ago, the region became a State target and turned into the object of "revitalization" policies in partnership with international bodies. The project ultimately meant that the people who used to live there were removed in order to make space for a park frequented by people of greater economic power.

And they want to expropriate more than 3,800 families, they want the territory all for themselves, because the territory is rich. Our territory is rich because we take care of it. Look, I've already participated in a *vazanteiros*<sup>24</sup> association, we took on a riverbank reforestation project. I remember that once, to reforest, I said: "my God, we are reforesting this river, but my belly is rumbling"; we used to bring lumps of brown sugar and sardines to eat mixed with flour in order to be able to reforest. I used to say: "I'm hungry here and I'm reforesting this river"; but all we do in life is right, because if you look at it today, it's something to say: "we were the ones who took care of this territory. See this tree? We were the ones who planted it, and you come to exploit it, to dredge up sand, you kill the animals with the heavy traffic you bring up here. There's a fish called *surubim* that doesn't appear anymore because of the jet-skis."

According to M.L., one of the difficulties in negotiating with the government were the attempts at dismantlement, undertaken by the offering of public jobs to some of the people who positioned themselves against the project. After a period of fatigue and withdrawal, M.L. said that, nowadays, the community has taken ownership of the cause, acknowledged its importance, and has gained support from researchers and other associations and organizations.

So we started deciphering the project, and they [the research partners] started researching and assembling conversation circles. So the community was strengthened. When you get there, when you put a microphone to the mouth of one of those women [community women], they say: "we are going to bring this giant down, we want this giant's head on a plate".

<sup>24</sup> According to the Ipadé portal, of the National Commission for the Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples and Communities (CNPCT), the name *vazanteiro* comes from the custom of using the ebb land on the banks of the São Francisco River to practice subsistence farming.



## GOING IN MINGA<sup>25</sup> UNTIL DEATH THE EXPERIENCE OF A YOUNG INDIGENOUS LEADER IN SOUTHWESTERN COLOMBIA

The Colombian Constitution of 1866 stated that indigenous peoples were made of savage, soulless, disabled and relatively useless beings. “Everything was done, then, precisely to take away what little land we had left. So the indigenous uprising as such and the uprising of my people was precisely to stand up in the fight, to protect the last territories we had left, and this territory is ultimately where we live today, where I was born.” L.P. was born in the fight. Daughter of a *cerrajera* family, a type of labour equivalent to slavery, she says that her childhood memories are made of many walks alongside her mother in meetings and marches. In 2017, at the age of 30, she became her people’s governor, something rare in a tradition that tends to choose male governors over 50 years old.

A memory weaver, L.P. dedicates herself to studying and registering her people’s as well as other indigenous people’s history. In a region marked by drug trafficking and armed conflicts, her generation faces the double challenge of remaining fighting for indigenous rights and for the protection of their territory, at the same time it seeks to break traditions within its own people, which, mixed with colonialist culture, pose an obstacle to certain types of change, such as indigenous women’s and girl’s right to political participation and equal opportunities.

Some traditions, however, are valued for their innovation and timeliness, such as *mingas*, community work based on mutual support, and *trueques*, product exchanges that do not involve currency exchange. *Trueques* not only include food trades, but also the trading of seeds, knowledge, information and gossip between villages.

## THEY ALL JOINED TOGETHER IN A HEAP, EACH WITH THEIR HECTARES A PRODUCTION COOPERATIVE BY THE LANDLESS WORKERS MOVEMENT (MST) IN SOUTHERN BRAZIL

I. W. was seven months old when she joined the settlement where today is located the agricultural production cooperative she works at. Settlements are pieces of land provided as part of an agrarian reform public policy which, in accordance with the Brazilian Constitution, ensures the social role of the land. I.W. studied in MST’s schools, graduated in Economy and now, in her Master’s, is studying Rural Development.

Joining the cooperative implies merging all the lands of each family settled in a single heap, and then separating them by areas of productivity. Every role receives the same remuneration, from the work done in the productive sector to the work done in the bakery, day-care, cafeteria and office. The governance is layered, coordinated by sectors, a collegiate board and an assembly, which is sovereign. All roles are distributed and occupied according to a rotation system. Recently, it was decided in an assembly that coordination positions will be increased by 5% as a kind of stimulus to the added layer of responsibility. For some years now, the cooperative has been profitable, which allows the remuneration of all people. I. values autonomy, living with her family and the rest of the community, life on the land and the house she is building for her, but still I. says it is not easy and that this kind of life is not for everybody.

**It’s obvious that today a salaried employee, who is ordered around by a boss, to me, in my opinion, is under worse conditions than us, because we own our means of production, but the tendency is to choose the easiest option, isn’t it? Sometimes it’s easier for you to be a salaried employee than to build your own space, build your livelihood, your own livelihood.**

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<sup>25</sup> According to the Artes Minga Foundation, the term Minga derives from the word *mink’a* or *minga* (in quechua) and it means: “collective work dedicated to improving the community”, as well as “a pre-Colombian tradition of voluntary community work for purposes of social utility or of reciprocal nature”. Available at: <[https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/america-latina\\_minga-indigena-protestas-colombia/6073816.html](https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/america-latina_minga-indigena-protestas-colombia/6073816.html)>. Accessed on: September 22, 2021.

## CONQUERING OUR RIGHTS IS A PARTY A FEMINIST COLLECTIVE IN ARGENTINA

C.P. shares a detailed account of the day the Argentine Senate approved the legalization of abortion and the ensuing party that lasted 16 hours. Years before, the same voting had resulted in a defeat. In 2020, it was approved. According to her, the defeat was essential so that feminist movements and their allies could reorganize themselves.

**Above all, we had achieved a macro-political translation, achieved a transformation at State level, of the law, which was more than just us making noise on the street, but also changing laws and the idea that the State has... the plan that the State has for our lives, because legal abortion changes the maternity mandate. So our role in life also changes, it changes everything. So, for example, through these small partial victories, in these moments that you see that, in reality, all was worth it and that for something to work out it first has to fail many times.**

As a member of one of the collectives that contributed for that to happen, C.P., a feminist academic and activist, explains that her collective is a rehearsal for horizontality. They have been together for six years and are a relatively small group. The work is done voluntarily and the decision-making is done by consensus. They have a “collective intelligence” that has been developed over the years and that involves writing and creating together.

## WE HAVE DEVELOPED FORMS OF SELF-GOVERNMENT SINCE OUR EXISTENCE A SELF-DECLARED AUTONOMOUS TERRITORY IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

W.P. began his involvement with the rights of indigenous peoples and his role as an environmental defender early on. His people have been located in a large area of the Peruvian Amazon since time immemorial. Six years ago, the territory was mapped and self-demarcated, and an autonomous government, of which he became president, was declared. Recently, as planned, a vote took place and a new leader was elected.

Due to the abundance of flora and fauna in the area, “the Amazon is our life and the life of future generations”. It is also an area in permanent dispute with North American mining companies, with illegal mineral extraction and with the State itself. **“Our objective isn’t to go against the State of Peru, on the contrary, we are Peruvians. What we want is for Peru to be truly plurinational, a bottom-up plurinational state with its autonomous governments cooperating with each other”.**

He also wants other nations to take control of their territories, so that together they can face the many challenges posed by the capitalist extractive system and the impact of the climate crisis. “An autonomous government is not a discourse, it is a fact.” The aim? *The Bem Viver* (Good Living) for all peoples.



# G. FOUR LESSON ON COLLECTIVE ORGANIZATION FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

G.1 THERE ARE MANY REASONS TO UNIFY AND ACT COLLECTIVELY, BUT ONE SEEMS TO BE PRIMORDIAL: NECESSITY

In *Free, Fair and Alive: the insurgent power of the commons*, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (2019) outline three of the most common forms, according to them, for collective action, or governance among peers, as they call it: spontaneous attraction, tradition and conscious design. In this text, I argue that necessity is a pivotal component of the experiences I have heard. This necessity is caused by neoliberal capitalism, rooted in sexism, in European colonialism and slavery, which decimated many peoples in the world - black people, women of all ethnicities, native peoples, leaving them landless, devoid of rights, devoid of means for life, rendering invisible all paths to recognition, identity, belonging, affection, creativity.

Upon listening to the various voices that make up this publication and understanding its territorial marker: the Latin American continent, which has a very peculiar set of economic, inequality and violence indexes, I observed that people's unification for collective action is often driven by the violence they have experienced, which has been provoked by the way in which the global economy operates and has been structured since the times of colonial terror. In the words of C.S. about how his involvement in the housing movement began: "first I joined in order to do what I do out of necessity, I came thinking about myself, right? But I realised that by my side there were people so much worse, with greater problems than mine, and only by organizing, only together I would be able to solve my problem, the same way we would be solving each other's".

Right from the start, there is an important thought-provoking element in this quotation, that the type of collective organization referred to in this text is not rooted in morality, nor is it an idealized and romanticized way of living. The people who are part of this small inventory are not good by nature, and the collective way of living and Common making is not an idyllic, bucolic place, free from tension, uncertainties and problems. Commoning is confusing, full of passion, commitment and desire for a better life, but also a space of tension, conflict and precarity.

The gear of life imposed by the dynamic of capital and its interminable cycles of accumulation and concentration of wealth as the organizing axis of private property causes living through collective organization to be the only option to many people. **“The Landless Workers’ Movement (MST)<sup>26</sup> always had this discussion that when we arrive on land how will we survive on the lot, right? An option was to arrive on the land and set up a worker cooperative to be able to survive, to have more, how can I put it, competitive power, let’s say, to survive in the countryside - negotiation, production, anyway” (I.W.).**

From life’s most basic necessities, collective action is intrinsically connected to matters of existence. But what type of existence are we discussing here? The first article of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)<sup>27</sup> states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. We know, however, that due to the aforementioned social, historical and political processes, this assumption has never materialized and does not seem to guide many of those in power. Hence, the importance of an intersectional approach for historical inquiries: why are the majority of people who do not have a place to live or to sow non-white? How is land ownership related to slavery and historical processes?

L.P., a Colombian indigenous leader, explains why she considers it important that her people get organized to tell their history, especially to themselves and to the next generations:

**Sometimes, when we don’t know our history, our roots, we can make collective mistakes, we can become alienated and get attached to external ideas, European ideas, and not only bring our ancient philosophy to the present, but also recognize that the main violences and conflicts have until now made our people, well, have relegated us to a far corner of society and also the way our identity has played an important role in this fight, well, of all the country’s indigenous peoples, sadly the cultural identity is being lost and we still have it.**

Once a necessity is externalized, we can connect with people we had never

imagined. The internet gave this a new dimension, expanding from a notion of community tied only to territory and ethnicity.

C.P., an activist in the contemporary Argentine feminist movement, talked about how a movement that started with a hashtag against femicide that went viral was able to legalize abortion in her country, years later. Certainly, much of the build-up that led to it was done by feminists over decades, but the internet facilitated people who did not know each other - and that might have been previously unaware of some of their own ideas and aspirations - to come together and act.

Likewise, black feminist activist J.G. draws attention to the importance of the black feminist movement and the strategic recruitment of more black women: **“We know that the onset of existing in a collective is not natural, is not encouraged. I say this: our life, our friends, are one thing, but what I mean is to be in a collective in order to achieve something, improve things, present new projects... So we aspire for black women to increasingly realize that they are not alone and that the micro-violences from the micro-politics affecting them affect all of us and we can fight this together.** So I think that there’s the part of denunciation and there’s the part of setting forth what we want, what’s our project.” J.G.

Another direction pointed out by Helfrich and Bollier (2019) is tradition, according to which the notion of a shared purpose and values is cemented by decades or centuries of practices and customs. What they call tradition, I would call ancestry and spirituality, which can also be understood as a necessity for many people.

There lies the value of live memory, oral history, of the elders, those who have more knowledge and, therefore, can safely lead the way. As well as the importance of spiritual guides, the enlightened, the enchanted, that essential part of many people’s lives that capitalist rationality insists on neutralizing, murdering<sup>28</sup> or dismissing as pagan exoticism.

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<sup>26</sup> The Landless Workers’ Movement organizes itself in search of justice and agrarian reform.

<sup>27</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which outlines basic human rights, was adopted by the United Nations on 10 December, 1948. <https://www.unicef.org/brazil/declaracao-universal-dos-direitos-human>

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<sup>28</sup> While I was writing this paper, remains of indigenous children were found in Canada where there used to be a missionary church for indigenous people. An essential trait of the colonial project was the extermination of life forms that didn’t serve the purpose of making the colonies rich

As I told you, I lived in these Catholic communities, but I never, never assimilated the Catholic religion. I knew there was something inside me, I mean, in my feelings, that called me to a life connected to spirituality, but a spiritual life of a God that is near, of a warrior God, a God that teaches us to free ourselves together. So, when I had contact with Umbanda<sup>29</sup>[...], I said: “it’s here”, because I saw the pontos:<sup>30</sup> “If my father is Ogum, when the champion of demands comes from Aruanda it is to save the umbanda children. Ogum, Ogum, Ogum lara. Save the battlefields, save the sea mermaid. Ogum...” Then I began to give it meaning, I say: “look, all these orixás are warriors”. And from there you get that strength, say: “don’t lower your head, this is your vital root, this is your vital strength.” So, like that, spirituality has taught me a lot, it helps me a lot, because it’s not something still, it’s not a matter of getting down on your knees and praying, there’s a hierarchy in Umbanda that says: you must follow in the footsteps of the elders, you have to ask for their blessing. But it’s not a blind thing, I follow in the elder’s footsteps because one day I will be in the elder’s place, got it? M.L.

“Running the world on the foot of the word that blows away.” And if the word blows away, it moves, just like ancestral traditions and knowledge. Simas and Rufino (2019) give us more to think about: “first it is necessary to say that African knowledge refers to an idea of tradition that is not static. In oral cultures, knowledge is based on the act of transmitting or delivering something in order to give the receptor the chance to add one more link to a dynamic and changeable chain. To ultimately pass it on.”

One of our interviewees, L.P., was one of the youngest and one of the few women to become governor of her territory. At the time we spoke, the governor of her people was an older, traditionalist man whose sexist behaviours were influenced by a Christian belief of female subservience. According to L., “this is a complex and difficult topic, but he is one of the older, more traditionalist men in our people who don’t even want women to speak, rather, ‘women should stay quiet and hold their heads low, obeying men’, but he is

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<sup>29</sup> Umbanda is a Brazilian religion that synthesizes various elements of African, indigenous and Christian religions, without being defined by them. It originated in the early twentieth century in Southeastern Brazil from the fusion of religious movements such as Candomblé, Catholicism and Spiritism.

<sup>30</sup> The Pontos Cantados (Sung Points) are ritualistic chants accompanied by percussion on consecrated drums and sung by the musician priests of Umbanda, the Ogans. This information can be found on the link available at: <[https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponto\\_cantado](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponto_cantado)>. Accessed on: 22 September 2021.

the current governor and an authority. I don’t like it at all, but, due to a cultural principle, I have to endure it.”

In cases like this, what can you do? The governor was elected according to the rules and agreements already in place in the community. It is possible to change such agreements, but in order to do that it is necessary to lay a path first. For L., it is vital to dialogue with the community and gain its support, to secure a majority, which is what she is already doing. For Ostrom (1999), it is important to guarantee that the agreements can be subject to change and that a voice to participate in this process is given to everyone involved in the governance arrangement. However, as we have previously observed, how much any person can change the rules varies from case to case and it is necessary to negotiate.

Returning here to the ideas of Axé, Good Living and Quilombismo, our interest is not to defend the past as something essentially good and free from inequalities or contradictions. But it is important to point out that, in a continent that suffers from memory erasure, paying attention to tradition is also laying a humanizing and expanding path for the ideas that inform us politically and socially. At the same time, within each community, a broad range of inequalities, oppression and contradictions is constantly being replicated and, therefore, there is an ongoing need for spaces of struggle and transformation.

Lastly, the idea of Commons by design is presented by Helfrich and Bollier (2019). That is, organizations strategically conceived in advance to be a place of communal practices. “When strangers come together to collaborate, a system deliberately designed can help share purpose and values.”<sup>31</sup>

I’d like to emphasize that many collectives considered traditional are also communal by design. It is possible to observe that, in a cyclic movement, there is a return of pursuits for ways to act collectively, as we saw with the Quilombista proposition, the contemporary feminist movement and the rebirth of prefigurative movements from the 1990s. No wonder that Zapatismo, indigenous peoples, quilombos and other forms of social

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<sup>31</sup> Author’s translation. In *Free, Fair and Alive: the insurgent power of the commons/* Silke Helfrich and David Bollier. Ed New Society Publishers, 2019.

organization typically understood as traditional continue to be great sources of inspiration for contemporary urban social movements.

At the Procomum Institute<sup>32</sup>, we built a citizen laboratory, a space dedicated and designed for common making, which is plausible only because traditions, movements, communities and different knowledges coexist in it. According to Antonio Lafuente<sup>33</sup>, a citizen laboratory is a space for the open generation of knowledge, capable of harboring a diverse collective of agents who aim to shape a social environment. A citizen laboratory is, therefore, a space for learning to live together: an incubator of communities. In this sense, the institutionality of citizen labs (which have other nomenclatures) is connected to the need for epistemic diversity, political production and radical democratic experience.

It seems, then, that necessity is a propeller, but it needs to be put in perspective, in an intersectional way, to become the leap that enables the construction of spaces that facilitate and enhance institutional diversity and local knowledge and the difference as the structuring axis of a radical alterity. If capitalism only favors very few people, the vast majority of the population could benefit from unifying to collectively address their necessities and perhaps learn, teach, unlearn, party, have fun and make some friends along the way.

<sup>32</sup> Procomum Institute is a non-governmental organization created in 2016 in Brazil, of which i am one of the founders and directors in office.

<sup>33</sup> <http://revista.ibict.br/liinc/article/view/3907/3229>



6.2 IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BELONG  
TO EVERYONE TO BE A COMMONS,  
BUT IT NEEDS TO NEGOTIATE  
WITH THE DIFFERENCE

A few times we decided to expand the collective, and then we called our friends, partners that we knew, people we respected and trusted, because you can't bring in a person no one knows, what if they're a spy, I don't know. We don't have a clear process, it's been a long time since we've brought someone new in, because... anyway, we have moments of crisis, moments that we're not sure... It's never clear where we're going, so when we don't have that clarity it's better not to bring in new people, because it gets noisier. C.P.

A very common assumption is that everything that is of the order of Commons belongs to *everyone*. In that sense, wouldn't the experience of C.P.'s feminist collective be a Commons? For the purposes of this work, in which I investigate organizations that prefigure a communal model of action against inequality, the answer is yes, because the collective's governance is communal, dynamic and does not sever the care of internal relationships from the world it is set out to build. They produce the world they believe in from their relational experiences within the collective as well.

Many academic studies address the importance of boundaries for the permanence of communal arrangements. This constitutes the first of eight principles developed by Elinor Ostrom (1999) as a result of her research on Commons: bounded borders. In the case of prefigurative fights, such as the ones aforementioned in this text, what we find is often a search for semi-delimited, sanded borders, with space for friction, comings and goings, and permanent improvement.

A communal and prefigurative organization cannot be absolute, neither does it seek quantity. It is a social system, an aggregation of people that, day after day, build and produce knowledge and trust, working for common goals, but, above all, relating to each other through care and shared experience.

Yet, a community can also be autophagic and oppressive. For that reason, it is important to privilege the action of network communities. A recurring practice is the formation of alliances, created by acting in a network with other complementary or similar organizations, which some theories have labelled federations. In her eighth design principle, Ostrom (1999) argues that Commons work best when nested in larger networks. Some activities may be managed locally, but others may need broader regional cooperation - for example, an irrigation system may depend on a river used by other people upstream.

Solidarity is a valuable quality, even in those who have different material needs or do not share a certain socioeconomic or racial background, but who believe that, by improving the conditions of some, the condition of all is improved. That is what Bollier and Helfrich would call Nested-Is opposed to *Homo Economicus*, someone driven by the promise of individual achievement. The Nested-Is understand that there is a relationship of interdependence between human beings and the world, broadly speaking, that sustains us. A notion of interdependence and unicity which appears in many philosophies such as Axé, Bem Viver and the ubuntu philosophy.<sup>34</sup>

In the practices I listened to throughout this research, the gateways vary, as well as the forms of participation. For instance, anyone can claim to be part of a Mexican territory protection network, but there is not much value in claiming to participate and doing nothing. Participation is, therefore, measured by involvement and engagement. In other cases, participation is established when there is some kind of common identity or necessity: if you are someone who needs housing, a black woman, or a woman who advocates abortion. Some are permanently open to anyone who wants to participate or engage as allies. A given community may not be for everyone, but it is premised on the alliance with the difference. A community that does not accept the difference and builds itself to annihilate and homogenize, rejecting everything that is not part of its group, is not a Commons.

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<sup>34</sup> According to the South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose, for the ubuntu philosophy, "the community is logically and historically prior to the individual" and that is why it has primacy over the individual. This community, he explains, is a "dynamic entity" between three spheres: the living, the undead and the unborn. If ubuntu can be understood as an ontology, an epistemology and an ethics, its most fundamental notion is "the philosophy of 'We'", according to the South African philosopher Mogobe Bernard Ramose. In collective terms, ubuntu manifests itself in the principles of sharing, mutual concern and care, as well as solidarity. Available at <<http://www.ihuonline.unisinos.br/artigo/3688-mogobe-ramose>>. Accessed on 25 September 2021.

Thirty years ago a group named “the solidarity” arrived, they were people who did not belong to the community, but who were channeled to the purposes of our people, who said “it is true that the peoples deserve recognition, it is true that certain processes of discrimination, structural violence, social violence must be put to an end, that we must start to construct and build”. They were the so-called “solidarity”, who, even now, are in their cities, but who followed the process closely, especially because at the time not a lot of people spoke Spanish, so they were the ones taking statements, denouncing issues, creating institutional bonds, all of those somewhat remote processes. Some are still involved in the process, but mostly, yes, someone from outside who has some knowledge we don’t is required, we ask for help and welcome it.” L.P.

### 6.3. AN IMPORTANT DUO: MODELS OF COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING AND TYPES OF GOVERNANCE

It’s in the fight, training happens in the circle, you start to understand what you’re doing through a daily basis, in the grassroots education. You don’t need to read a statute, you start to understand it and that synergy gets built. M.L.

Whether they are oral, written, formal or informal, every collectivity has its rules, explicit or implicit. More than a rule of law, building a community is about co-responsibility, about duties. Or, as Laval and Dardot (2017) put it: “human activity is always coactivity and co-obligation, cooperation and reciprocity”.

Here, I have merged two of Elinor Ostrom’s (1999) principles. The second, which states what I have already mentioned in this text: the “one size fits all” neoliberal idea does not exist and, therefore, rules and agreements must fit local circumstances, dictated by those who make up the collective body. As many of the collectives she analyzed were involved in the management of natural resources, in addition to the local community, she argued that taking into account ecological needs was also a fundamental part of creating the rules. Ostrom’s (1999) third principle tells us that participatory decision-making is vital. “There are a number of ways to make that happen, but people will be more likely to follow the rules if they’ve helped write them. Involve as many people as possible in decision-making.”<sup>35</sup>

Many collectives practice varied forms of governance and decision-making, which include traditions passed on orally, assembly, voting, experimentation, social dynamics or decision-making by consensus. This is because the contexts in the relationship between culture and structure can be very different and often emerge from reciprocity and trust. The common-doing that is revealed here does not blindly defend any specific decision-making process. We know that often, from a distanced point of view, it seems like self-management or collective organizations need to be synonymous with horizontality in order to have any validity. In the social movements of the so-called new left, this quest has been revived, although it is not new. In the Prefigurative Politics collectives, exercising decision-making based on consensus and assemblies became very common, such as in the Occupy Wall Street movement or in the 15M in Madrid.

For the researcher Francesca Polletta (2002), this is also due to a learning experience that was developed over the years. Through her research into participatory democracy in social movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, she concluded that the new social movements have, in some ways, a very different version of the participatory democracy of the 1960s. Nobody believes that decisions can always be made through strict consensus anymore. Activists are more comfortable with the rules, less hostile to power, and more aware of the inequalities hidden in informal relationships.

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s translation. Appendix D: Elinor Ostrom’s Eight Design Principles for Successful Commons and Commoning Tools em Free, Fair and Alive- The Insurgent Power of Commons, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, New Society Publishers

But, by observing different types of organization, we notice that hierarchy can be expressed in different ways. No space is free from inequalities. The question is what are the tools that can be used in order to, through practice, reduce them as much as possible.

Beside is a list of some of the decision-making technologies developed by the experiences I have listened to, stressing that they are not exclusive and often take place simultaneously in the same collectivity.



- **assembly with voting, where the majority wins.**
- **assembly by consensus, in which the dialogue is extended until everyone had agreed.**
- **rotation of executive positions, usually with one or two years in office.**
- **elections to choose executive positions.**
- **layered decision-making with relative autonomy, such as units, working groups, coordinations.**
- **do-cracy: those who donate more time, gain more space within the collective.**
- **open and frequent meetings.**
- **annual or semi-annual planning sessions with everyone's participation.**

L. P. tells us that, among his people, when you are chosen to be a governor or a spiritual leader, you cannot refuse, because it is a service that must be provided by you to that collectivity.

Spiritual leaders are born, let's say it is a mandate allocated by nature itself, from the womb, that they are going to be a spiritual leader and that they have this role in the core of the community as a person who is going to guide spiritually, that will provide spiritual strength. And the territorial authorities are elected by a unanimous collective. In our peoples' case, the authorities are chosen by the community and have the obligation to accept it. That is, a person cannot say "I want to be", and I believe that is the difference we have with the rest of the government authorities, because, from our ethnic procedure, what happens is that the people look, observe, observe who has memorized, who is clear about the guidelines of the people, observe who are the people who are going to guide, how they make their decisions, let's say that they sort of scan everyone and the people choose their leaders unanimously, and one must accept because it is an ancestral and cultural mandate, and one cannot refuse that mandate, they accept and take the role without any type of remuneration, there are no resources at play, they are not paid, let's say it is close to a cultural service and, as people here put it, it is a debt that we owe to the people, to the collective. Then the leader is chosen unanimously and the duty is appointed to them, they have to guide and make decisions and, in our case, the governor is the one with maximum authority. Generally, they are all over 50 years of age. Why? Because they are experienced, because at 50 years old one has lived a little longer, because at that age you already have most of the knowledge.

This logic of duty is also a premise in the agricultural production cooperative where I. W. works. A person can be elected coordinator even if they do not apply for the role. In both cases, this practice is provided for in the bylaws and the selection procedures are carried out in an assembly. In the cooperative's case, through voting, and in L. P.'s case, by consensus.

The chance to learn and improve procedures is an important quality. At the time of the interview, the movement J.G. is part of, which started with the organization of an event and then was acknowledged as something continual, was coming up with an internal regiment, based on the mistakes, conflicts and



successes of recent years. The need for the regiment was framed as the collective maturing.

Instead of a regiment, C.P.'s collective has a charter of principles, which ethically and politically guides actions and to which the members can resort. L. H. and I. E. emphasize that both written and tacit agreements are important. Since collective processes are dynamic, the written word becomes a starting point. Hence, the importance of reviewing agreements within timeframes that must also be defined according to necessity. In I.W. 's cooperative, for example, the composition of the collegiate board has been recently modified in order to add a younger member, a representative of the second generation of cooperative workers. L. P., meanwhile, was elected governor even though she is a woman and was younger than the traditional starting age of 50 years old.

Being present, working for the collectivity and participation seem to be the procreative principles of power and legitimacy. Through them it is possible to display commitment and involvement, but also to determine the nature of the exchange that is being established, therefore leaving the morality field, where working for the collective is something good, and entering the field of exchange, trade, interdependence, of necessity, reciprocity and the materiality of life.

The process of building governance in collective organizations is generative, not prescriptive. It happens in practice, in the making, and that is why it is important to maintain openness to revisions. Learning, listening, communication, dialogue, transparency and patience seem to be essential values for this ongoing construction, as well as continual awareness of the privileges and points of view of each person involved.

#### G.4. IT IS NECESSARY: AGREE TO DISAGREE

We are always trying to reach a consensus, although sometimes it is not easy to get there. So, if you disagree with something, the best approach is the assembly, because there, collectively, we can talk. Another approach is the liaison group, which also works as the collective's care body. By approaching the liaison group and saying: "look, I disagree with this and that", you can start a dialogue, right? Another approach: we have a WhatsApp group together in which everyone is present. And, yes, when there is a need, we have also created spaces for conflict transformation. That's when there is a deeper, more restrained topic which we can't discuss and solve in an assembly with everyone. And I am also going to tell you that there are disagreements that are never solved. Because something else that we learned to be able to build with diverse people is that we also build in a diversity of ways. In other words, I don't agree with some of my colleagues' approaches and it's possible that they don't agree with my approach to work. But we have learned to live in the same house. So, that's the other, isn't it? We're not going to solve every disagreement. If they are expressed, we recognize them and thank each other for existing mutually under the same roof, which is the network, isn't it? I.E.

If there is no Commons without commoning, there is no common-doing without the emergence of our differences, in a variety of ways. The question is not whether there will be divergences, but how each collective builds its strategies of resolution, appeasement or acceptance of disagreements and conflicts, also taking in consideration their nature, context and power relations.

In addition to using the assembly, the circle or social media groups for expression and opposition, a technology present in more than one experience I have listened to was the formation of work groups for reception and care, which serve not only to prevent and mediate conflicts when they transcend participatory capacities, but also as a sphere of trust and a listening space for more sensitive issues.

In many collectives, there are codes of conduct to prevent, monitor and follow up the violences that can emerge from the many inequalities among participants. “A sick person in the collective makes the whole collective sick. And when we notice it we don’t even know where the confusion started, but you have that whole mess”. J.G.

Socioeconomic context also influences the conflicts that emerge within communities. An example is the story told by one of the interviewees about a woman who used the collective’s name to raise funds and then disappeared. In that case, means to seek sanction were thoroughly discussed, but they reached the conclusion that calling the police did not match the movement’s values, since they knew that the woman was under a multilayered context of exclusion. Yet, the episode served to improve the guidelines on who, how and when to speak on behalf of the movement and raise funds.

There are also power relations and violence embedded in certain gender, race and class relations. That is why using care as a fundamental part of building the Commons is so important. If, as J.G. teaches us, one person is capable of making a whole group sick, it is also true that a group can heal wounds and people.

According to Antonio Lafuente<sup>36</sup>, care, or rather, care in its many shapes, comprehends every practice that leads to the repair or maintenance of life.

It relates to what is most simple and common: giving food, providing comfort, generating well-being, keeping the conversation going, listening to the unreasonable or unusual, offering concern, speculating about the future, experimenting alongside others, doing things together, relishing in nuances, following procedures and creating safe spaces. Since there is nothing more abundant than pain in the world, there is nothing more necessary than offering trust, peace and time.

Care is perhaps what differentiates commoning from a group formation that is driven by profit or productivity. If relationships are central, conflicts continue to exist, but mediating them becomes fundamental to the process of communion and decisions will be guided by care. In the Procomum Institute we say that care

paves and sustains the Commons practices.

There are conflicts of many different natures. In the housing movement, for example, some shared experiences involve people who listen to loud music and problems with interpersonal relationships, such as arguments between neighbours or couples fighting within housing occupations. In cooperatives, coordinators and cooperative members have debates regarding disagreements over approach to work. Listening and transparency are key in these processes. It is important, therefore, that people are aware of agreements, ethical limits, possible sanctions and who to turn to in case of need.

**“What I mean to say is that conflict mediation is not breaking off fights, it’s not taking one side or the other, conflict mediation is talking, listening, it’s positioning oneself, yes, of course, right? We have to do that too. Depending on the case, there’s individualized care, to which we refer if it’s a psychological case, [...] we always try to understand the family, try to identify what their problem is.” C.S.**

Sometimes, conflicts have no solution. Depending on the conflict proportion, it can lead to the departure of a member or to the dissolution of the collectivity, although all collectives studied in this work have existed for at least six years.

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<sup>36</sup> Antonio Lafuente. Elogio à potência cognitiva dos cuidados. Outras palavras, 15 May 2020. Available at: <<https://outraspalavras.net/descolonizacoes/elogia-a-potencia-cognitiva-dos-cuidados/>>. Accessed on: 24 September 2021

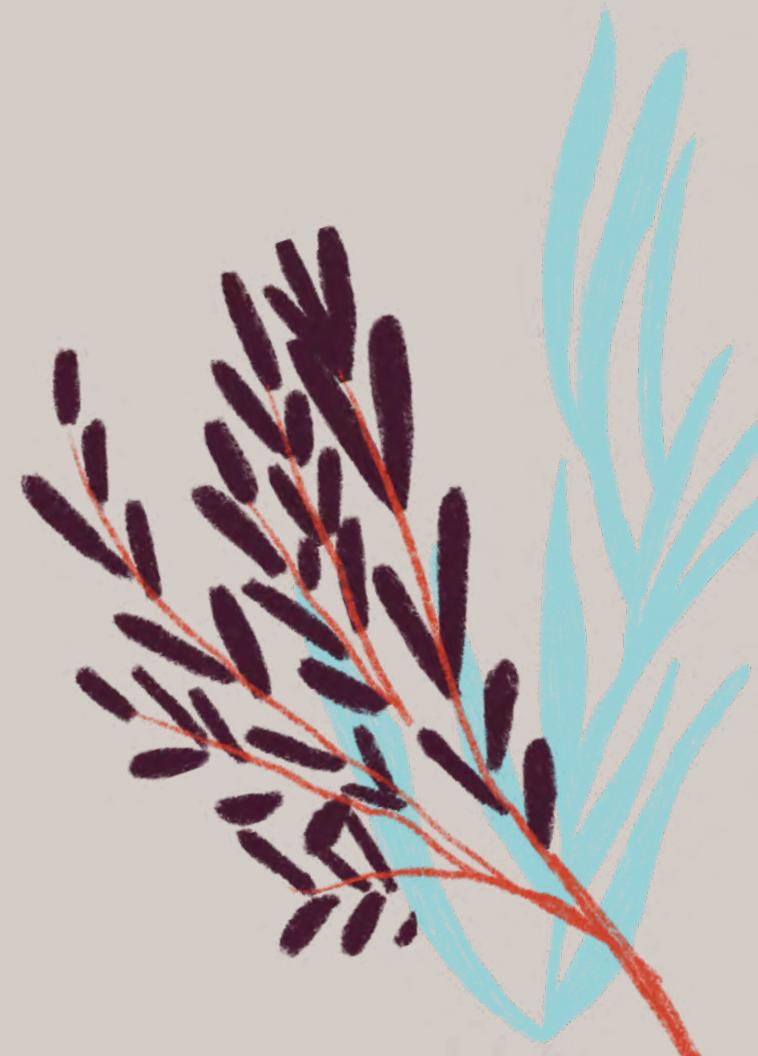


Sanctions also vary. In organizations like the cooperative, work hours are deducted. In one of the indigenous communities I've listened to, as it is autonomous and has its own institutions, sanctions include prison, community work and even flogging, something that L.P. says is a colonial heritage which, in her time as a governor, she suspended, but that is employed by the current governor. Just as the decision-making process is layered, so are certain disagreements or conflicts.

In Elinor Ostrom's (1990) research, she realized that the development of a quick and cheap conflict resolution strategy was necessary (which refers to the sixth principle: conflict resolution mechanisms), while at the same time the employment of gradual sanctions was required (which is the fifth principle). "Commons operates not on goodwill, but on responsibility."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Author's translation. Appendix D: Elinor Ostrom's Eight Design Principles for Successful Commons and Commoning Tools. In: Silke Helfrich e David Bollier. *Free, Fair and Alive: the insurgent power of the commons*. New Gabriola Island: Society Publishers, 2019.



# 7. A COMMONS FUTURE

No commons is possible unless we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them. Indeed, if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject. This is how we must understand the slogan “no commons without community.” But “community” has to be intended not as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from others, as with communities formed on the basis of religion or ethnicity, but rather as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation, and responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.<sup>38</sup>

Silvia Federici

This work started out as an investigation of existing forms of Latin-American organization that collectively develop agreements, governance and decision-making processes towards distributed power and recognition to all. Forms of organization that are in search of equality and collective solutions inside and outside their arrangements. The Commons I searched for demonstrated prefigurative forms of creating social systems, places of struggle and counter-hegemonic practices.

But most importantly, they do that by showing different ways of thinking and understanding life from its beginning, from its premises. As Luiz Antonio Simas and Luiz Rufino tells us in *Flecha do Tempo*, the politics of the macumba<sup>39</sup> is a bet that assumes that there is no single explanatory origin for the things in the world.

And by defying these premises, all other parts of the political moves have more space to perform differently. To look to the knowledge shared is to free ourselves and therefore a call for the humanization of all people and a statement that all lives are unique and matter.

<sup>38</sup> Feminism and the Politics of The Commons by Silvia Federici. Available at: <<http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/feminism-and-politics-commons>>. Accessed: 28.set.2021.

<sup>39</sup> Macumba is a word of African (Bantu) origins. Various explanations of its meaning include “a musical instrument”, the name of a Central African deity, and simply “magic”. It was the name used for all Bantu religious practices mainly in Bahia Afro-Brazilian in the 19th century. In the 20th century, these practices re-aligned themselves into what are now called Umbanda, Quimbanda and Omoloko. The word “macumba” is frequently used in Brazil to refer to any ritual or religion of African origin (as slang), and although its use by non-practitioners remains largely pejorative in intent (referring to all sorts of religious (or otherwise) superstitions and luck-related rituals and beliefs), and is considered offensive, its use among actual practitioners is not viewed negatively. Available at: <<https://educalingo.com/en/dic-en/macumba>>. Accessed: 28. Sept.2021

These prefigurative spaces of commoning do not exist because they are denying a dominating system, although they are too. They are acting and practicing it on a daily basis and by doing so they are already creating realities that coexist with other realities. Therefore, they are not only non-capitalist or non-state, but are much more than that. It is clear that the State is important for social reparation and organization, but it should not be the center of the fight. Commons weakens the totalizing beliefs and hopes placed on the State and the Maker because it shifts the centre of the discussion to the relations we establish every day and that, most of the time in an invisible way, sustain our life.

In the Commons we prefigured I learned about paths, processes, daily construction, politics that socially transform and engender equality and means for living. We are in the search for autonomy, suspension, breach, fissure, breath, struggle, expansion, everyday life, care. Joy. People that do not accept that reality is given or is unchangeable and that we can learn from each other. We have time, we have creativity, we have disposition and enough energy to do it.

The driving force is necessity but also a system of beliefs that go beyond materiality. It is also the experience of commuting and learning. The exercise of humanity. The point of arrival, generally speaking, is not a given, because it is also being made.

As Nêgo Bispo<sup>40</sup> often says, there is only the beginning, the middle and the beginning, reminding us about the circularity of life, showing us that there is no we separated from them. What do these experiences tell us about our own life and choices? What other knowledges can we share and connect? What if we looked at these experiences longer, understanding how to enhance, expand and promote their knowledge? Strengthen the knots, leaving the loose ends to give new knots, in a movement that has no end, but a beginning, a middle and a beginning.

The fight for inequality is an economic fight, but what these experiences show is that the economic model is sustained by a set of beliefs, values and philosophies that have a certain origin. It is essential to look at our histories and retell them, expand them. The way History has been told there is the us and the others.

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<sup>40</sup> Nêgo Bispo is one of the main voices in the thought of traditional communities in Brazil. A resident of the Saco-Curtume Quilombo, in Piauí, he is a poet, writer, teacher, political activist and militant of the quilombola social movement and rights for land use. He is also one of the main critics of the way native peoples (indigenous) and Afro-diasporics are treated in Brazil.

**These others, with their non-hegemonic knowledge, the south of the world, the edges, with their traditions, their ways of living, collective problem-solving, regenerating, innovating and creating beauty and life in the most challenging conditions, have a lot to teach us and inspire us to re-enchant ourselves. And as Luciane Ramos Silva tells us, power equality, opportunity and social dignity is a premise for enchantment. No justice, no peace. Axé!**





## FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR A COMMONS FUTURE:

1. **Staying with the trouble: care sustains communities.**
2. **It is essential to make agreements, set boundaries and be able to revisit them**
3. **There is no finishing line (come, we will learn as we walk)**
4. **Networked communities is fundamental (act locally, think globally)**
5. **Experimenting is necessary (and then, if possible, systematize and share the experiences)**



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