

## Towards a 'mindful commons'-

### Mindfulness and the attention economy are signs of the times

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Neoliberal capitalism is an advanced form of symbolic and material power.

We are living through a totalitarian moment in the history of dominant capitalism characterized by unprecedented targeting of our bodies and our attention. This neoliberal moment is calling forth new forms of resistance as individuals and communities seek to roll back the latest stages in the historic processes of enclosure by embracing the languages of the commons and commoning. Resistance, appropriate to the productive forms of contemporary power that moves through and is productive of our bodies, minds and places, is no longer limited to the realms of institutional control and ownership but includes the challenge of restoring the mindful commons, free from the colonisation of our attention. Mindfulness, linked to critical engagement and ethics, can embody a phenomenology of the commons.

The rise of the commons and commoning as a series of practices of resistance – involved in reclaiming ecology as a practice of liberation, reclaiming the urban commons, and extending radical democratic control to the realms of the economy – is emerging alongside popular engagement with practices of mindfulness and other forms of askesis or mind-body practices such as yoga. These movements are emerging in complex and sometimes antagonistic ways. Some secular mindfulness practices such as Cognitive Based Mindfulness Therapies, for example, are also being absorbed into neoliberal consumerist and institutional logics, stripped of their ethical liberating teachings. Corporations, educational institutions, and governments are absorbing mindfulness techniques into their logics of productivity, resilience and adaptation to unacceptable power structures that conceal their own roles in producing suffering and exploitation. Mindfulness, reduced to an individual therapeutic response to societal or structural sources of exploitation, can serve the neoliberal agenda of devolving responsibility down to the individual.

Each movement – commoning and critical mindfulness practices - is also capable of confronting new forms of institutionalized power that has enacted an 'enclosure' or closures that render invisible and fractured the deep continuities between our human nature and the realm of the commons understood as the 'more than human' (ecology) that sustains us.

Both movements are calling forth a new individual and cultural awakening, a making visible that which has been actively concealed and placed at the margins of our attention by acts of cultural and economic enclosure, dis-embedding (market making), dislocation and colonisation (of forests, lands, bodies and subjectivities). These processes have accelerated under the influence of dominant capital or capitalization, which, given its universality, cohesion, expandability, intensity and flexibility – is best understood as a 'symbolic architecture of social power'.

Our human capacity for directing our attention, which is a form of productive energy, is emerging as a postmodern arena of intense conflict – signalled by the debates about political engagement, fake news, and attempts by corporate and political power to capture our loyalty using online technology. It is also visible in concerns about loneliness, disconnection, depression and mental health, and addiction. These issues are not unrelated to the conditions created in our societies by rampant consumerism, invasive screen-based technologies, and their value systems built around hyper-individualism and the insertion of the market as the chief arbiter of social outcomes. The debate has just begun.

The dawn of the 'attention economy' – an era of corporate and political targeting of our attention energy to feed the global processes of capitalization – is invoking new forms of resistance, including critically engaged forms of mindfulness practices – re-embedded in ethical and radical teachings drawing from the Buddhist tradition. Buddhist teachings remain a potential and critical resource to throw new light on Western experience and support a transition to sustainable forms of society and prosperity.

*Our bodies and our attention are the new realms of enclosure*

Operating through the price system, capitalization quantifies and reduces qualitatively diverse power processes into a universal language, and by doing so 'absorbs them into the process of accumulation' (Shimson and Bichler,2009, 268–9).

For Guattari (1984, 1995) modern-day capitalism and its worldwide complex of production and consumption is the primary and most important source of human subjectivity because subjectivity conditions and participates in the production of all other commodities. We are the product. Subjectivity has become a key commodity – an achievement of a global media, information and entertainment complex – the nature of which is conceived, developed and manufactured as systematically and predictably as the Apple iPhone or any other commodity.

Mindful and non-violent conscious living are no longer options limited to those with the means to embrace alternative lifestyles, but are moving to the centre of debates about the conditions of a new kind of freedom in an ecologically and socially constrained world: a world where freedom and limits must be reconciled alongside mind and nature.

The practice of 'ahimsa' or non-violence as a way of life is no longer an optional lifestyle but an imperative in this age of the 'Anthropocene': in this sense we are entering an ecological Axial Age – summoned by a convergence of insights around (1) 'planetary boundaries' (we crashing through a number of critical thresholds across a number of planetary boundaries defined by Johann Rockström and his team (2009), including climate change, biodiversity, the phosphorous nitrate cycle, and land-use change) and (2) a need to embrace individual and collective practices of 'self-regulation' in pursuit of new forms of sustainable forms of prosperity, involving a radical reorientation of our understanding of 'freedom' that finds liberation in form, within limits. At the level of the individual, practices of self-regulation aligned with freedom and liberation will be akin to the freedom that accompanies virtuosity, as in excellence in yoga, meditation or forms of discipline in jazz and improvisation that are associated with alternative notions of human joy, accomplishment, and satisfaction.

*A Dance of Two movements: Critical Mindfulness and 'Commoning'*

Two movements have enjoyed a popular surge of interest and participation over the past decade or two. One is the mainly secular mindfulness movement, with roots in Buddhist teachings, which often involves a therapeutic response to the mental pressures associated with modern lifestyles at work, in the market place or at home. The other is the commons or commoning movement.

At a moment of transition in the economic and ecological trajectory of the West and the eclipse of its totalizing grip on our geopolitical and cultural imaginations, ideas and practices associated with non-Western philosophical traditions are throwing new light on the limits and legacy of the West's traditions of thought and experience, supplemented by insights from neuroscience on the plasticity of our mental functioning. From the point of view of mindfulness-based paths to enhanced awareness, human beings are not trapped forever in the abstract attitude: another world is possible and it will be accompanied by another set of possible dispositions, characterized by a greater sense of intimacy, compassion and continuity with all beings.

The dissociation of mind from body, of awareness from experience, is the result of habituation – personal and institutional – that can be interrupted and broken through meditative technologies or practices that suspend

the flow of discursive thought, can tame the inherent restlessness of the mind, and lead to calm and enhanced awareness or presence (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1993: 25–6).

For those who choose to do so, locating mindfulness practice within an 'engaged' Buddhist philosophy or community of practice can uncover both practice-based and conceptual resources for 'radical critique and revolutionary praxis' (Clark 2014), peace, and both social and environmental justice (Strain 2014; Nhat Hanh 1992). Prompted by a political and economic system where the prospects of living fully and in full awareness, mindfulness practitioners, potentially and in actuality, are accessing resources that, to paraphrase Enrique Dussel (2008: 80–81), are tapping into the *conatio vitae conservandi* (life-conserving drive) in a confrontation between the will-to-live and the will-to-power, sometimes articulated as a reclamation of our right to well-being.

As Michel Foucault commented in the spring of 1978 (Davisson 2002) at the conclusion of a period of Zen meditation practice in the Seionji temple in Japan: 'if a philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe, or equally, born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe (Foucault 1999: 113). Mindfulness-based practices, especially those located in or reconnected with their engaged Buddhist origins, offer a threshold or opening to reflection on the deep structural or societal causes of dis-ease that have accompanied individuals with the rise of modernity, neoliberalism and life as it is increasingly defined by the extrinsic values of the market place where we are invited to internalize a radical and isolated responsibility for our larger fate and our sense of agency retreats to the realms of 'self-help' solutions in the realms of the psyche and the body.

### *Commoning*

The second movement involves activist and academic champions of *the commons* who have begun to respond to neoliberal capitalism and consumerism with a series of critical counter-practices, piloting a radical alternative to the prevailing hyper-individualist and consumerist ethos that recycles 'biological necessity into commercial capital' (Bauman 2010: 67).

A commons has a number of important characteristics:

- It is a social system with some self-organizing capacity and a commitment to preserving and sharing a local resource and working together with shared values and identity.
- Access to the protected resource is organized on an inclusive and equitable basis.

- A commons is often identified with the particular resource that it has evolved to safeguard, use and preserve. In fact, a commons is *always* more-than-a-resource. It is a resource *plus* a defined community *and* the protocols, values and norms devised by the community to manage its resources.
- Finally, there is no commons without *commoning* or the practices that embody the social practices and norms for managing a resource for collective benefit.

As Ugo Mattei explains:

*A phenomenological understanding of the commons forces us to move beyond the reductionist opposition of 'subject-object,' which produces the commodification of both. It helps us understand that, unlike private and public goods, commons are not commodities and cannot be reduced to the language of ownership ... It would be reductive to say that we have a common good. We should rather see to what extent we are the commons.*

(Mattei 2014: 5)

Silke Helfrich (2012) has identified a number of core beliefs that seem to be intrinsic to the practice of commoning and the organization of the commons, including:

- for rivalrous resources there is enough for all through sharing (the atmosphere);
- while for non-rivalrous resources, there is abundance (solar energy);
- humans are primarily cooperative;
- knowledge is produced through peer-to-peer networking or collaboration;
- and the vision of society foregrounds a conviction that one's personal unfolding is a condition for the development of others.

A feature of this contemporary commoning movement is the shift from a view of the commons as a 'thing' or even as a set of arrangements to a phenomenological emphasis on the active promotion of commoning as a way of being, doing and seeing the world (Bollier 2014).

Commoning has been described (Weber 2013: 44) as an attempt to redefine our very understanding of 'the economy', to challenge a dominant understanding that has championed rationality over subjectivity, material wealth over human fulfilment, and the system's abstract necessities (growth, capital accumulation) over human needs.

Commoning shatters these dualisms and reconfigures the role of participants so that we are not simply reduced to the roles of producers or consumers but regarded as participants in a physical and meaningful exchange with multiple material, social and sense-making needs. Commoners realize that their household needs and livelihoods are entangled with the specific place and habitat where they live, and with the earth as a living entity. The recovery of the commons is a collective act of restorative memory and remembering (Bollier 2014), practice, and a rendering visible of new possibilities for economic forms in the face of a failed attempt by champions of capitalist power to impose a false arrest on the historical evolution of economic ideas: to revive and re-embed slow practices in an ethos that is local or situated, entangled in relationships that are human and non-human, and that command an ethics of care, reciprocity and interbeing (Weber 2013).

Rowe describes the commons as the 'hidden economy, everywhere present but rarely noticed. It provides the basic support systems of life – both ecological and social' (Rowe 2001). He notes that the 'destruction of the commons has been the leitmotif in much that passes for "development". It is the threat that connects many of the problems that beset the world', from pollution of the water and sky, to the breakdown of community, the toxic entertainment industry, and attempts to engineer and patent the genetic substrate of life itself. Bresnihan (2015) sums up one perspective of the commons, one that refuses to fix the idea to that of a 'resource', for the commons is not merely land or knowledge but *the way* these, and more, are combined, used and cared for by and through a collective that is not only human but also non-human.

Commoning, then, denotes the continuous making and remaking of the commons through shared practice. Bresnihan (ibid.: 4) adds that at the heart of this relational, situated interdependence of humans and non-humans is not an impoverished world of 'niggardly nature', nor an infinitely malleable world of 'techno-culture', but a *more-than-human* commons that navigates between limits and possibilities as they arise.

#### *Conclusion: A call for a political economy of attention*

The subject of this article is a call for a political economy of attention: a *mindful commons*. Its cultivation will demand a network of new conversations and practices, some of them embodied in the technologies of meditation and related mind-body practices or askēsis. This is an opening contribution about the ground upon which these two movements can meet and how that ground can be cultivated to deepen our critical and collective understanding of the 'attention economy' and what's at stake.

Attention is that to which we attend. William James (1958) observed that what we attend to is reality. Wallace (2006) believes that our very perception of reality is tied closely to where we focus our attention. Increasingly,

our individual and collective ability 'to see' has been mediated by a highly reductionist mindset of market-based economics and culture. Bollier (2014: 150) notes that 'to see the commons – *to really see the commons*' we need to escape this reductionist mindset. This is true of the urban garden waiting to emerge through an act of attending and imagination, a pause that allows us to see through what has become hidden in plain view behind the appearance of an abandoned piece of urban 'waste' land.

This is also true of the quality of our attendance to our own bodies and dispositions if 'care for the self' is to be cultivated and inform our relations with the world. In her article 'Nothing Comes Without its World: Thinking with Care', María Puig de la Bellacasa, reminds us that all knowledge is situated, knowing and thinking are inconceivable without a multitude of relations that also make possible the worlds we think with. She wants us to remember that 'relations of thinking and knowing require care' (de la Bellacasa 2012: 198). Care is relational. She proceeds to offer Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher's definition of care as including 'everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (ibid., citing Tronto 1993: 103).

Only what we pay attention to seems real to us, continues Wallace (2006). While what we ignore seems to fade into insignificance until, perhaps, we are blindsided and events suddenly call out for attention. He adds: 'Each of us chooses, by our ways of attending to things, the universe we inhabit and the people we encounter. But for most of us, this "choice" is unconscious, so it's not really a choice at all.' Which raises interesting questions about freedom.

While we hold to our beliefs about free will, we are equally conscious of our struggles to direct our attention. As Wallace observes:

*We may believe in free will, but we can hardly be called 'free' if we can't direct our own attention. No philosopher or cognitive scientist needs to inform us that our behaviour isn't always guided by free will – it becomes obvious as soon as we try to hold our attention on a chosen object.*

(Wallace 2006: 14)

James (1958) also held that attention has a profound impact on character and ethical behaviour, and that our capacity to voluntarily bring back wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgement, character and will. While James regarded a gift for sustained attention as a fixed deposit, a capacity one inherited or not, the contemporary mindfulness movement and associated spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, are associated with forms of training to enhance the capacity for attention in attempts to interrupt

patterns of conditioned behaviour and cultivate a genuine quality of freedom and spaciousness around our capacity to see, our capacity for awareness. There is an emerging homology – rendered all the more urgent by the nature of the attention economy – between the practices and dispositions of commoning and the mindfulness movement, especially for those who wish to inform their activism and powers of resistance.

Attention is now regarded as an essential part of practices of consumption, entertainment and media culture, as it has become intensely valued both as capital and as a scarce commodity. That innate tendency towards 'absence' from our moment-to-moment experience has become an open door for a highly sophisticated series of social and corporate technologies designed to target and capitalize our attention energy. Indeed, in the context of post-industrial society, attention is now regarded as a currency with greater value than that which circulates in our banks, one that is now the single most important determinant of business success.

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