

Domen ŽALAC

Fighting the socio-ecological crisis through commoning

Title: *The commons in an age of uncertainty: Decolonizing nature, economy, and society*

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Publisher: University of Toronto Press

Place and year of publication: Toronto, 2021

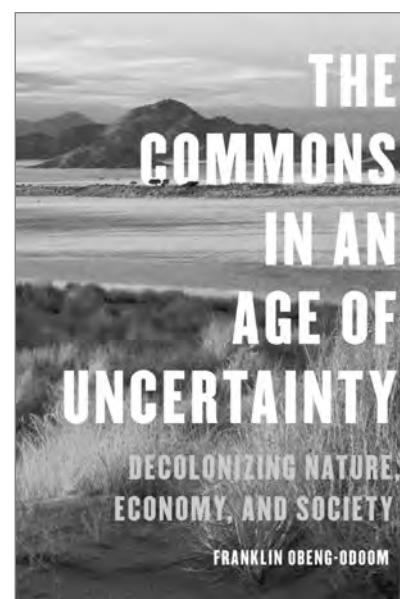
Number of pages: 264 + i-xv

Franklin Obeng-Odoom's *The Commons in an age of uncertainty* is conceived as an action plan to save today's political economy along the lines of redefining the ecological and political economy of the future. Placed at the forefront of the study presented in the book is an overview of two schools of thought – Conventional Wisdom (CW) and the Western Left Consensus – which the author contrasts with the Radical Alternative (RA).

According to Obeng-Odoom, environmental crises cannot be conceived of without political economy. Therefore, he divides his action plan into various detailed categorizations of nature and society. Through his many years of research presented in this book, he places himself at the intersection of the social and natural sciences. He combines these into a concrete premise: guidelines for community-based organization and definition of ownership relationships in the context of cities, technologies, oil, and water in order to fight against the socio-ecological crisis resulting from the neoliberalization of private ownership of land, its resources, and manmade products. He defends the thesis that today's treatment of nature and the environment is the result of an economic and political imperative of growth that over the past decades

has striven toward radical exploitation of environmental resources based on a dichotomous understanding of public and private property.

The book first offers a methodologically dialectic analysis of the historical and ontological foundations of the concept of the commons as one of the elemental property categorizations, among which private property is merely one of the lower environmentally unsustainable ownership categories. The dominance of the concept of private property in public discourse is reflected in the predominance of private property, which has largely become the privilege of a narrow circle of individuals and transnational corporations (TNCs), which work against the needs of the wider society. Irresponsible and unfair management of the natural environment and its resources leads to a state of an obvious socio-ecological crisis at the global level. The reasons for this include growing social inequality, increasing migrations at various levels, global warming, spatial segregation of the population, and degradation of the urban living environment in urban slums. All these phenomena clearly indicate the environmental, social, political, and economic uncertainties today's society is dealing with. Nonetheless, the author highlights the fact that this uncertainty



is not new. It is primarily its conception and experience that are different: they are increasingly atomized into individuals and their relationship between their own existence and the impact this has on the space and environment they live in. From the perspective of the humanities and social sciences, these uncertainties take the form of various anxieties and emotions, and pessimism toward the future. The author highlights two interconnected ontological approaches that influence the current discourse about common resources and the commons, and are covered by the paradigms of the Western Left Consensus (WLF) and Conventional Wisdom (CW) already mentioned above.

The author uses the first half of the twentieth century – that is, the period of gradual reorganization of industrial

capitalism and TNC organizational units, which even today still represent the largest source of uncertainty for the ecosystem and society – as the historical basis of uncertainty. This reorganization takes place in the field of political economy, in which the TNC organizational units operate independently of the society. TNC decisions and actions influence the degradation and reconfiguration of the environment and space. Among other things, the author refers to John Kenneth Galbraith, an intellectual representative of post-Keynesian economics and the conceptual founder of CW. Proceeding from Galbraith's work, the author introduces an analysis of political economy by emphasizing the political and cultural milieu and contextualizing his own inherited African attitude toward commoning. Understanding the political and cultural milieu is crucial for in-depth insight into the "content" of social life, the individual, and society.

As mentioned above, Obeng-Odoom presents an action plan by reconceptualizing the overlooked concept of the commons and commoning. The more notable authors he uses to conceptualize the development of the commons and common resources include the winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, Elinor Ostrom, who represents a developmental succession of the CW school of thought. Ostrom introduces the concept of Common Pool Resources (CPR), which Obeng-Odoom defines as a necessary urban concept of sustainable management, which combines the commons and common resources into a form of tangible and intangible property without institutional control or the need for privatized regulation. This is about the emancipation of the community, which should manage the commons and common resources on its own in an autonomous and sustainable manner. In this regard, the author raises the issue of a community's rational operation and its role in addressing ecological challenges.

The main WLC issues refer to the establishment of commoning and who would be suitable for managing the commons and how. This is a consensus approach based primarily, if not entirely, on anti-capitalist, antiracist, and antipatriarchal values that affect the relationship between land (natural resources), rights (social protection, civil rights, human rights), and political and legislative governance.

The author proposes a third way of thinking within the context of commoning the management of public resources and the commons: the Radical Alternative (RA), whose purpose is to unravel or "decolonize" the historical development of social relationships in the Global South in relation to the Global North. He thereby raises the issue of advantages and shortfalls of the CW and WLC paradigmatic discourses. At best, the RA is a vision or retrospective of possible alternative restructuring of the ownership of common resources and the commons to date based on reconceptualizing the concept of land, property rights, and possession of tangible or intangible goods that are not connected with the capitalist modification of all dimensions of the environment and space.

An interesting contribution to urban studies, in addition to a comprehensive examination of the socio-ecological crisis, is provided by the second part of the book, which is based on the development of the overlooked African theory of commoning the urban environment, with emphasis on the right to uncontaminated and healthy community space. This also raises the issue of fair use of energy resources for transport and industry in urban centres that pollute the environment. Pollution originates from the inefficient use of energy and material resources that indirectly lead to environmental degradation. In some African countries, plastic waste alone accounts for up to 10% of all

waste; therefore, the author's definition of petroleum products makes sense: socio-ecological substances with environmental and social dimensions that directly and indirectly affect the health of the environment and people. Moreover, the author highlights the example of marketizing the export of waste from the Global North to the Global South. Throughout, Obeng-Odoom seeks to clearly illustrate the theoretical paradigms set through their structural limitations, which he transcends with empirically supported examples that he devises along the lines of the Radical Alternative discourse.

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Biography

Franklin Obeng-Odoom is an associate professor of global development studies at the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science at the University of Helsinki in Finland. Obeng-Odoom's research and teaching interests centre on the political economy of development, urban and regional economics, natural resources, and the environment, fields in which he has published six independently authored books; including *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society* (University of Toronto Press, 2021), and *Global Migration Beyond Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Political Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

Information about the book

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