

Review: The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society

Leticia Costa de Oliveira Santos¹

Abstract: In the book *Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: decolonizing nature, economy and society* (2020), Franklin Obeng-Odoom proposes a commons based system. His so-called Radical Alternative stands in relation to the dialectic between two fields of readings on the commons grouped as Conventional Wisdom and Left Western Consensus. He denotes that both readings are limited from a decolonial critique. The key to his Radical Alternative is on the centrality of land, autonomy, and justice from the Global South. It presents land in an approximated sense to territory/territoriality, as used in Latin America, and territorializes the political discussion of the commons. He also develops the understanding of universal justice on land and contributes to discussions on contemporary commons, as he affirms the contemporaneity of forms of relationship with the land and persistent material and cultural exchanges on the African continent.

¹ Federal University of ABC, São Bernardo do Campo, SP, Brasil.

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Review

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Introduction

What divergent explanations are there for socioecological crises in the Global South? What are the consequences of privatizing nature, given the Global South's social diversity? Are the commons barriers or means to progress and prosperity? Franklin Obeng-Odoom in the book *Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: decolonizing nature, economy and society* (2020) addresses these issues. The author, who has a background in Political Economy, is more emphatic than authors that debate commons as remnants or experimentations that coexist with capitalist system: he effectively proposes the instauration of a commons-based system.

To show this proposal, he systematizes readings about the commons in two fields - the Conventional Wisdom (expression borrowed from J. K. Galbraith) and the Western Left Consensus, locating them in relation to his Radical Alternative. He considers both limited, coming from a decolonial perspective, referring not only to the kinds of solution they imply, but to the way the "problems of the commons" are framed.

As he shows, the Conventional Wisdom is mainly represented by the duality between Garret Hardin, Elinor Ostrom, and their analytical traditions. The author claims that, although located opposite each other, both readings are logically close, as they locate socioecological crises inside arrangements, emphasizing individual agency, without close attention to justice, power, and scale crossing. Ultimately, for the author, there is no paradigm shift between both.

On the other hand, Western Left Consensus groups hold standpoints based on Marxist and Neo-Marxist readings of the commons. From this stand, the commons as all that is collectivized, and that are paradoxically presented as a potential solution to overcome neoliberalism or as a support to advancing capitalism as potentially co-opted. For Obeng-Odoom this disarray is fuelled by the assumption of capitalism being inevitable on the political-economical transformations trajectory and, therefore, presenting only a shallow criticism of its historicity and spatiality. He also claims that there is a lack of rigor in considering that anything can be commons and that there is a restricted (and Eurocentric) understanding of commons as property regimes.

His critique to both ways of framing commons comes from a decolonial standpoint. Obeng-Odoom claims that thinking from the Global South must be a methodological approach for investigation. What may be the most important contribution of this book is the way it helps the reader to become aware of how the author conducts research taking decoloniality as a method - which reflects in problem framing, the definition of sources of data and of analysis criteria.

Regarding the data sources and cited material, Obeng-Odoom is mostly guided by referenced studies conducted in African countries, with emphasis on Ghana and South Africa, and studies conducted by the author himself. He takes advantage of field reports, oral tradition, and judicial decisions, that, according to him, are usually dismissed as sources in academic publishing. He highlights that this methodological choice has implications on the politics of knowledge production, given that systematic data collections are not abundant on the African continent.

Considering the investigation problem, he indicates that the kind of framing from the Global North implies solutions that also came from the North - solutions that assume alleged unavoidable paths to progress, through markets, property regimes and the commodification of nature. He underlines the insufficiency of analyses about commons in the South that actually come from the South and observes that the Global South is usually pointed out as a source of uncertainty, conflicts and environmental and institutional fragilities, fitting neatly into the explanations by the tragedy of the commons. Such biased framing assumes the Global South as holder of a pristine nature and isolated human populations that at some point started suffering impacts due to purely economic motivations, overlooking the co-dependency of socioecological aspects. This is obviously an a-historic view, as it ignores the colonial heritage in shaping politics, the economy and territory in the Global South, particularly in Africa, in addition to disregarding the persistence of interactions that cross scales in the global system, to which the South is a central, not peripheral.

Obeng-Odoom suggests a historical review of the commons. He understands there is no deliberate negligence regarding the history of enclosures, but that historical readings are usually made through Marxist lens in English enclosures that mark the transition from feudalism to capitalism. This could be a limited perspective, that does not consider the formations of private property on lands away from Europe (neither the emergence of money, debts, and so on), that he stresses as fundamental for the understanding of land dynamics, appropriation and rentism, the relationship with nature and social relations throughout the book.

In the heart of the book's argument, the author looks to Conventional Wisdom and Western Left Consensus contributions regarding four topics: cities, technology, oil and water. He identifies what he considers as failures of these fields, from whose dialectic he establishes his Radical Alternative.

According to Obeng-Odoom solutions derived from Conventional Wisdom are related to a "third way", based on collective action, on solutions of organized people that refuse state power centrality. Although they defend that communities have the capacity to manage resources, they end up fostering market solutions (privatization, taxes, e.g.). They derive from rational choice logics, increase of efficiency and in defence of a consumer sovereignty to ensure prosperity and access to resources (e.g., through an alleged expansion of water access by bottled water), with no regard to justice. Furthermore, these logics, according to the author, rely on technology, with a triumphalist view on technological advancements and innovation.

For the author, the most significant divergence of the Western Left Consensus is in its centrality of justice, which does not have such prestige in Conventional Wisdom. The Western Left Consensus opposes market solutions; however, although it is critical to a triumphalist view of technology, it defends its appropriation (as a means of production) to a "new economy", with no deeper thought about the trajectories of economic and technological transitions. He makes a particular critique of the emptiness of environmentalist and degrowth discourses that cannot address socioenvironmental

impacts. For example, of a sudden transition to renewable energy mixes that do not tackle justice issues, land eviction and loss of jobs due to demands from the Global North, for which Africa must be the world's power plant. It is a standpoint that sympathizes with local interests, but still takes a patronizing stand, as does Conventional Wisdom and its efforts to "Save Africa from the Africans".

Both readings have different values, but deeply rooted commonalities. Apart from their insufficiencies, he understands that the solutions themselves can be part of the problem, as they reinforce social inequalities and environmental impacts. Both frame problems as a need of control and efficiency, assuming the tragedies: lack of resources and unruly growth. Both antagonize the state, put much trust on technological innovation, neglect land (and impacts due to, for example, raw material extraction to produce technological artifacts to the speculation mediated by technology), and the persistence of monopolies based on the argument of investment optimization (for example, to enable great technological transitions). Although they mine peoples' auto-determination, both readings present a romantic view upon local solutions whose structural limitations are questionable, such as the precarity, and life and health risks related, for example, to the production of slums, and the work of recyclable material pickers.

Obeng-Odoom suggests that the processes that shaped current social conditions in Africa should be seen critically, particularly the inheritance of planning systems and scientific justifications that subsidized the creation of segregated cities (which persisted even after the end of colonization), the suppression of indigenous exchange forms and the imposition of ways to relate to the land, production, property, and consumption patterns that do not fit existing or desired social relations. He highlights Africa's positioning as a source of energy and raw materials for the world, and the imposition of markets and allegedly formal property relations, which negatively define informality. In this sense, the key for Obeng-Odoom's Radical Alternative lies in the centrality of land, autonomy, and justice from the Global South.

Throughout the book, Obeng-Odoom reaffirms that, in thinking about commons he means land. In a sense, he grounds the political discussion of the commons as he emphasizes rent, dispossession, speculation, the material sources of resources, and social bonds, regarding commons as more than political action. He highlights the centrality of land to life in Africa - as in other places in the Global South - calling attention to the "Africanist sense of land". Although he little interacts with Latin American authors, his readings are closely related to the sense of territory for authors such as Escobar (2010) and Haesbaert (2014). Land in this context has a particular meaning: not as a base for nature, but as nature itself, as well as an inseparable entity from the economy and the identity of Africans and Black peoples around the world. Land is presented as a totalizing concept, that comprises what is alive and what is not. Besides, it is sacred, revered and protected; it is produced, although this production alone does not justify its appropriation.

In this sense, the author works with a particular understanding of justice, of a universal right to land, even for those who do not work on it - that applies for outsiders including foreigners. In Africanist conceptions, communal lands are not lands without

owners, but lands that belong to the community. On the other hand, belonging to the community does not mean being closed to outsiders, that can deal with the community. Therefore, he positions his understanding of the commons far from authors who propose that access to the resource should be guaranteed only to those who produce it.

It is coherent with an idea of abundance (CAJIGAS-ROTUNDO, 2007), in which worries about free-riders, that permeate Conventional Wisdom mainly, but also Western Left Consensus thinking, does not fit. The threat for commons is the invisible free-riders, as absent landowners, so that the solution would be equitable land distribution that accounts for local demands. In this sense, he also lessens the over-attachment to agency in relation to structure - that he believes has taken even readings derived from Marxist.

Following this, commons - or land - could not be analysed as a kind of property (or a property relation), because commons precede their existence. This would be a Eurocentric means of thinking about commons, that considers transitions in property regimes and the land's tendency to become a commodity - which for Obeng-Odoom does not connect to the Africanist sense of land, since it cannot be capitalized as it is not replaceable. Understanding land conflicts as conflicts over the appropriation of a commodity may imply that other layers of the relationships between society and land, that go beyond economic exploitation, are ignored. Local institutions, existing markets, gift economy, land and work sharing systems, rewarding systems, solidarity and a myriad of material and means of cultural exchange that are persistent on the African continent, and the sense of the commons itself are also ignored.

Finally, Obeng-Odoom's Radical Alternative would enable a structural change, also through actions by/of the state (that are not isolated on the African continent), of which autonomy is a core aspect. As Latin American thinkers of Political Ecology, like Escobar (2016) and Souza (2019), he suggests that the construction of institutions is based more on questions of distribution and sovereignty, on local understandings of justice and relationship with the earth, and less emphasis on economic growth. Summing up, he defends that any solution must come from the guarantee - and not the suppression - of autonomy and self-determination of the Global South. When he claims that commons in Africa should be observed he refers to present, necessarily contemporary, not "primitive" or "pre-modern" forms. He approaches an important debate on what contemporary commons are, that are not limited to technological, cultural or urban, but include these, and are absolutely connected to the territory. He speaks from the Global South not as a representative of this universe (always highlighting his African positionality), but as a source of global contributions that expands the horizon of future possibilities.

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Franklin Obeng-Odoom, PhD., Universidade de Helsinki, Finlândia

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Leticia Costa de Oliveira Santos

✉ costa.leticia@ufabc.edu.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7406-3384>

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Resenha: The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society

Leticia Costa de Oliveira Santos

Resumo: No livro *Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: decolonizing nature, economy and society* (2020), Franklin Obeng-Odoom propõe um sistema baseado em comuns (commons based system). Sua chamada Alternativa Radical constrói-se em relação à dialética entre dois campos de leituras sobre os comuns agrupados como Sabedoria Convencional e Consenso da Esquerda Ocidental. Ele indica que ambas as leituras, a partir de uma crítica decolonial, são limitadas. A chave de sua Alternativa Radical está na centralidade da terra, na autonomia, e na justiça a partir do Sul Global. Apresenta a terra com um sentido próximo ao de território/ territorialidade, como acionado na América Latina, e territorializa a discussão política dos comuns. Também desenvolve o entendimento de justiça universal sobre a terra e contribui para as discussões sobre comuns contemporâneos ao afirmar a contemporaneidade das formas de relação com a terra e trocas materiais e culturais persistentes no continente africano.

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Resumen: En el libro *Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: decolonizing nature, economy and society* (2020), Franklin Obeng-Odoom propone un sistema basado en los comunes (commons based system). Su llamada Alternativa Radical se construye con relación a la dialéctica entre dos campos de lecturas sobre los comunes agrupados como Sabiduría Convencional y Consenso de la Izquierda Occidental. Indica que ambas lecturas, desde una crítica decolonial, son limitadas. La llave de su Alternativa Radical está en la centralidad de la tierra, la autonomía y la justicia desde el Sur Global. Presenta la tierra con un sentido cercano al de territorio / territorialidad, como se usa en América Latina, y territorializa la discusión política de los comunes. También desarrolla la comprensión de la justicia universal por la tierra y contribuye a las discusiones sobre los bienes comunes contemporáneos al afirmar la contemporaneidad de las formas de relación con la tierra y los intercambios materiales y culturales persistentes en el continente africano.

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