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Relationality, commoning, and designing

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ABSTRACT

This workshop explores and reflects upon both how relational ontologies can support design processes that target commons and commoning as outcomes, and how commons and commoning can work as speculative lenses for the understanding of relationality in Participatory Design. Here, we invite the PD community to engage with questions such as: how do we embrace and rely upon relationality when designing collectively and in a participatory manner within more-than-human ensembles? How do we become commoners and what do we nurture in common? What do we lose and what do we gain by considering commons with a keen eye on relationality? Which kind of relational qualities are essential for commoning design and designing commons? In short, “Relationality, commoning, and designing” aims to be a venue for critically supporting alternative and more sustainable futures for all (not only humans) by means of participatory designing and commoning.

KEYWORDS

Commons, commoning, relational ontology, relationality

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1 INTRODUCTION

Commons can be thought of as entanglements of shared resources, people, institutions, rules, principles, and practices concerned with the preservation and enrichment of such resources [4], whether they are pastures, fisheries, urban gardens, digital platforms, or knowledge artifacts. Along these lines, commoning, commons as a verb, brings attention to the actual commitment and engagement in the social practices of managing a resource for the collective's benefit [3, 22]. In short, commoning relates to practices that enable our livelihoods, attend to the production of ourselves as a common subject [8], and make us reconsider the human-nature relationships in ways that challenge the existing dominant extractive and capitalist models [25].

Against this backdrop, a growing body of literature has recently stressed the importance of framing and understanding commons and commoning through a relational ontology, and thus encourage us to avoid focusing on traditional dichotomic separations such as human-nature, structure-agency, body-mind, and consequently to shift our attention from essences or totalities to relations, emergence, and co-becomings [25, 32]. A relational ontology displaces the human, its rationality, and its agency over the world from the center of discourse, and it lets the otherwise neglected affective entanglements among commoners, commoning, and the commons to emerge in the public.

Relational ontologies are at the crux of pre-modern, alter-modern or anti-modern existential projects that survived and still resist the colonizing and hegemonic activity of Western modernity. The modern way of being in the world is based on conceptual dichotomies that work to justify the Western hegemony over the world. Philosophically, the subject is separated from the object, whereas biologically, the human being is separated from nature. These dichotomies lay the foundation to, geopolitically, separate the West from the rest [12]. Relational ontologies oppose these dichotomies by defining every being (including the human) as interbeing, as inherently interdependent and mutually constituted [31]. In this perspective, relationality is not a byproduct of any particular (Western) being but a precondition for being in the world [21]. The isolation, extraction, removal, marketing, and commodification of beings is seen by relational ontologies as a disease that spreads through interdependence networks and slowly kills mountains, rivers, cultures, and many other shared interbeings [16].

Western scholars concerned with environmental depletion have framed the modern way of being in the world as a ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ [13], as if humans could not avoid destroying their

environment unless it is a private property of another human being. Subsequent research has shown that privatization is not the only way to protect and replenish the environment, as pre-modern communities have successfully taken care of natural commons for thousands of years without even having property litigation mechanisms [20]. The literature on common pool resources, commons, and commoning became influential in several fields to inspire, guide, and justify the production of shared things.

In contemporary design research, and especially in the field of Participatory Design, commoning has been used as an invitation to rethink the roles of actors or entities in commons arrangements [19, 23]; as a frame to discuss intertwined practices [17, 27]; and as a tool for strategizing and locating socio-material practices as a part of city-making and urban commons [18, 24], the strengthening of local democracy [14], and online collaboration and documentation practices of commons-oriented groups [7, 15, 30]. Moreover, the political dimensions of working for and with commons have been highlighted in Participatory Design [26]. This previous research suggests a burgeoning interest in considering relationality in commoning and designing activities.

However, despite the existing sensibility towards relationality in Design [9, 11] and PD [1], the growing interest in commons and commoning still lacks a sound understanding of how the awareness and appreciation of a relational ontology could implicate its own practice(s) and the commoning practices that design eventually becomes part of.

We propose this workshop as part of an ongoing work on the relationships between commoning and design, which now points towards relational ontologies. We build on earlier conference sessions and workshops on commoning within the PD and the broader design communities. For instance, ‘Designing Commons—Commons for Design: Workshop at DRS 2014’ and ‘Co-designing and commoning’ at Nordes 2015 [6]. While these earlier explorations on commoning focused on mapping commons and commoning initiatives around design research, more recent ones have moved towards assessing the relevance of the notion of commons as an objective, and commoning as a way of doing and being for design. The session ‘The Politics of Commoning and Designing’ at the Design Research Society conference 2016 [29] shed light on tensions and potentialities around commoning in design. The session employed the commoning concept to discuss, among other things, how design can aid the creation of spaces that facilitate commoning processes [2], and the commoning practices existing in a value-driven cultural movement against commodification of cultural commons [17]. More specifically, this workshop proposal lays its foundations on the following two experiences. In the ‘Commoning Design and Designing Commons’ workshop at PDC 2020 [5] organizers tried to investigate the commons/ing design entanglement by focusing on: (i) infrastructural approaches, (ii) vocabulary and terminology; (iii) the articulation of collaborative practices; (iv) activists’ and indigenous’ knowledge. One concrete outcome of the PDC 2020 workshop was the *Commoning Design: a Pluriversal Slide-Deck V2* [10]. The slide-deck was co-created at the Participatory Design Conference in 2020 and developed further in 2021. It provides a series of cards that explore a shared vocabulary to talk about different ways commoning and design are connected. Similarly, the ‘Sense Weaver’ workshop, with its visually driven sense-making format

previously facilitated in public spaces and then brought to PDC 2020 [28], attempts to facilitate the identification of commons within a community and to create collective and experiential definitions of what a community or group intends for common goods (and what consequently makes them a community or a group). This was made possible by mixing moments of exploratory trips, creative photography and storytelling that invited participants to cross everyday spaces, cultures, and technologies, making possible participation without previous academic knowledge about commons and commoning. Our proposed workshop will tap into this body of work, to explore some of the dilemmas and dynamics of commoning design and designing commons through a relational lens.

2 WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

This workshop has a twofold overarching objective. First, to explore how relational ontology can support design processes that target commons and commoning as outcomes. Secondly, to reflect on how commons and commoning can work as speculative lenses for the understanding of relationality in participatory design. As such, we think the workshop can appeal to those who aim at critically supporting alternative and more sustainable futures for all (not only humans) by means of participatory designing and commoning.

Based on the above, the workshop wants to engage participants using the following questions:

- What does it mean to consider the commons with a keen eye on relationality? What do we lose and what do we gain by doing so?
- How does a focus on relationality implicate for the (participatory) designers’ role(s) and position(s) in the context of commons oriented or based projects?
- How can we frame and understand relationality in ways that are relevant when commoning design and designing commons?
- How do we embrace and rely upon relationality when designing collectively and in a participatory manner within more-than-human ensembles?
- Which kind of relational qualities are essential for commoning design and designing commons?
- What does it mean to make visible and map relations?
- How do we become commoners and what do we nurture in common?
- Why do we need each other?
- Who or what is not here though very much needed?
- Which relations do we craft with us/them?
- What are the qualities of the relations we design?

The workshop aims at multiple concrete outcomes. An enhanced and extended slide-deck will be created by (a) inviting participants to create ‘cards’ (based on their position papers and Pluriversal Slide-Deck template) as a presentation tool during the first part of the workshop; and (b) by developing new “linking” elements for the slide-deck, that will result from the reflections and discussions on relationality in commoning design and designing commons. Additionally, with the permission of participants, we intend to audio record extended parts of the workshop and create a dedicated episode of a forthcoming podcast series on Commoning Design.

The episode will include selected and relevant excerpts of the workshop. Finally, interest and opportunities for editorial projects (e.g., proposals for edited book, special issue, collective article) will also be inquired as possible workshop's next steps.

3 HOW TO CONTRIBUTE

Interested researchers and practitioners should send an expression of interest in the form of a brief position statement (max 1000 words) reflecting on a current or past project, project idea, or case that is able to shed light or prompt discussion on the commons/ing & design relationship(s) through a relational lens as inspired by any of the themes above.

For this workshop we strive for broad acceptance. Therefore, the contributions will be reviewed by the workshop organizers primarily in order to group cases and themes and organize pre-workshop assignments. If interested submissions surpass our logistical possibilities to handle participation in the workshop, contributions will be selected to preserve overall coherence with the workshop theme, heterogeneity of specific themes portrayed by the position papers, as well as geographical distribution and gender-balance. We envision a maximum number of 30 participants.

Organizers will make available a workshop's webpage to provide additional information for the submission process and to accompany participants in the preparatory steps for the workshop.

4 WORKSHOP FORMAT

We suggest this workshop as a full-day online one. To allow for broad participation and favor inclusion of potential participants worldwide, we suggest to split the workshop between synchronous plenary sessions and asynchronous group/time-zone based sessions. These sessions will be planned to accommodate participants from different time-zones (including possibility of short f2f sessions in Newcastle for those present). The final schedule will be created to account for the locations of the participants as most conveniently as possible. Additionally, small preliminary preparatory activities will be allocated to participants prior to the workshop sessions. Materially, the workshop will rely on the use of video-conferencing systems, online whiteboards, collaborative software tools, and the digital version of the Commoning design Pluriversal Slide-Deck.

Conceptually, the workshop will follow these main phases. Initially, elements from the Pluriversal slide-deck will be used as a prompt to trigger open conversations and storytelling among the participants. This will flesh out early shared and diverging understandings of relationality in design and commoning. In a second phase, participants will work in groups to further reflect, elaborate, and map relevant elements that emerge from the previous phase. Based on the outcome of this phase, groups will work extensively on a joint and collective board to map elements of the designing commons & commoning design theme. Ultimately, a collective reflective phase will be devoted to synthesizing the key elements emerged from the mapping and to plan further collaborations.

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