

THE "NEGATIVE COMMONS"

Between waste and ruins

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The commons generally refer to shared resources that are useful to a community that takes care of them, i.e. positive effects. The notion of "negative commons" focuses on the problems raised by the management of certain realities whose effects are negative, particularly in the environmental field: waste, nuclear power plants, but also other elements that we will inherit in the future and that we will have to take care of. The more capitalist societies develop, the more they lose their capacity to absorb what they produce in excess, relegating this waste to the poorest areas or to the depths of the earth and the oceans. In addition, other realities, which cannot be considered as waste, deprive us of a future by their mere existence. How can we politicize the treatment that should be given to them? This is the question that the second part of the reflection opened by the negative commons intends to answer.

The contemporary concept of waste has emerged relatively late. In the past, there was no such thing as absolute or irretrievable waste, even though this system has become more widespread in the richest countries. What to do with this waste? This is the starting point of a reflection on the "negative commons" conducted in the early 2000s by two German sociologists and which received a new impetus, independently, at the turn of 2017, in an attempt to rethink the commons, these "resources" taken in charge democratically by collectives, in the age of the Anthropocene. Two lines of analysis stand out, which take the negative commons from the angle of waste that, theoretically, could be reabsorbed by communities extended to non-humans, or the one we propose, where the negative commons is analysed through the prism of the ruin that persists through time. Beyond the picturesque ruins, we must now broaden our perceptions of ruins to those whose continuation threatens the habitability of the planet: fossil fuels, the supply chain, digital technologies, conventional motorized agriculture, contemporary modes of transport, etc.

The historical background

One of the first known occurrences of the concept of the "negative commons" was by Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen¹. In an article published in 2001, the two researchers, sensitive to the inequalities between the North and the South and aware of the attempts to appropriate the authentic and vernacular commons by international organizations that capture their vocabulary in order to better hijack their logic, argued in favour of a necessary defence and reappropriation of the commons. The heart of their article is the need to give a place to the economy at the heart of the thinking of the commons, but an economy understood above all in the sense of what ensures the re-production of

¹ M. Mies and V. Bennholdt-Thomsen, "Defending, Reclaiming and Reinventing the Commons," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 22, no. 4, 1 January 2001, pp. 997-1023. I owe this reference to Justine Loizeau, a doctoral student at the University of Paris Dauphine. I would like to express my gratitude to her. The first mention that I identified of this expression, taken in a very different sense, is in Peter Drahos' book, *A Philosophy of Intellectual Property* (first edition, Brookfield, Aldershot [Great Britain]; Routledge, United States, 1996).

life. From this perspective, private property and wage labour have historically been factors in the destruction of the commons and communities. For the two authors, nothing testifies to this more than the fate reserved for waste, which has become unassimilable and is described here as a "negative common".

Behind the loss of the sense of community, a deeper mutation has emerged, breaking with the cycles of life, its "symbioses", synonymous with the erasure of the "continuity" between human communities and ecosystems. Indeed, an economy without community or common ground, which no longer assumes its continuity with the living, can only produce waste for which it no longer has any use and which it has no other choice but to discard or destroy. We could say, using the vocabulary of economists, that waste becomes a negative externality. It is no longer recognized as an integral part of a living community. It is no longer anything more than the residue of transactions between actors separated from each other by divergent economic interests, none of whom wishes or can assume the future, because of this first break, which is itself a sign of a second, deeper break, with regard to living beings such as animals, plants and microbes, which are also rejected from the community.

For both authors, the conclusion is clear: the real tragedy of the commons is that "neither ownership nor self-interest can solve the problem of waste or the negative commons². Although not explicitly stated, the article suggests that this problem arises in the North as a result of a process of expropriation from human and biotic communities. Only in this context does waste acquire its own characteristics. In other places and times, it is only a moment in the cycle of the reproduction of life.

Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen's negative commons is thus affirmed as a common that must be wrested from a generalized private order. Hence the criticism levelled at the "solutions" put forward by local authorities, such as the installation of centralized composting plants managed by companies. These installations are met with protests from local residents, who are aware of the pollution caused, the small number of jobs created and, above all, the profitability imperative to which a private economic player must submit, forced to import waste from beyond its immediate vicinity in order to enter into a logic of growth to the detriment of the territory that hosts it. In this sense, regaining control over the negative commons means recognizing the importance of the processes of reproduction of life from which they are not detachable and assuming responsibility for them in their own right (echoing the political issues of decentralization and regionalization put forward by the authors). It is in this respect that a reinvention of the commons, in the North, first involves taking responsibility for one's own waste, the motto becoming: "We take care of our garbage ourselves³!"

This concept has received little attention since this publication. There is, however, at least one exception, which digs into this waste issue from a complementary, but slightly different, perspective. In a 2013 book, Japanese researcher Hidefumi Imura proposes the category of "negative local commons⁴" to describe waste treatment centers (objects of Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen's critique), while giving it a broader extension, however, going so far as to include radioactive waste reprocessing plants, far from the only organic waste described above. Facilities such as "nuclear power plants, airports or waste incinerators are necessary", writes Imura, "from the point of view of the general interest [public benefit]⁵". However, these infrastructures face a rejection, which is assimilated to

² M. Mies and V. Bennholdt-Thomsen, art. cit. p. 1000.

³ Ibid, p. 1013.

⁴ H. Imura, "The Environment as a Commons: How Should It Be Managed?", *Environmental Systems Studies: A Macroscopic for Understanding and Operating Spaceship Earth*, Springer Japan, Tokyo, 2013, pp. 85-98.

⁵ Ibid.

"NIMBYism" (from the acronym NIMBY, for Not In My BackYard), linked to the risks of accidents or pollution. Compared to previous analyses, the diagnosis has lost its political character: there is no longer any question of reversing the privatization movement and reconstituting living communities. The common has moved from waste to the infrastructure that ensures its treatment, without questioning the model that presides over this organization. However, this shift remains interesting: by focusing on infrastructure, the author highlights the paradoxical nature of the terms used: "These facilities [...] involved in waste treatment [...], owned or managed by the state, local government or private companies, do not therefore strictly meet the conditions for being 'public goods' that would imply common ownership, common use or non-exclusive use by individuals⁶." The paradoxical nature of this designation (calling "common" what is not) underlines a contrario the lack of democratic ownership of the infrastructures described: the negativity, far from being confined to a rejection motivated by fear, could well be due first and foremost to the undemocratic nature of the management of infrastructures that are nonetheless deemed necessary from the point of view of the general interest. Between the public directly affected by the actual or potential nuisances of these installations and the phantom public of the general interest, between refusal and ventriloquism, there is no public or community with the capacity to take political control of these issues.

Finally, in 2018, Sabu Kohso, a Japanese author, researcher and activist, published an unpublished article in French following the publication of the collective book *Fukushima et ses invisibles*⁷. In this text, Kohso makes a synthesis at the crossroads of the preceding analyses. He is inspired by Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen when he writes that "[t]he sharing of resources for the purpose of creating mutual aid or the commons rests [...] on a sine qua non condition: that the land and the people maintain an organic relationship, so that the excesses and wastes linked to the reproduction of the people can be used in return for the reproduction of the land. Yet this return to the earth is made impossible by capitalist societies: "The more capitalist societies develop, the more they lose their capacity to recycle what they produce in excess, thus relegating the negative to the realm of the invisible - the air, the ocean, the subsoil, the economically inferior territories⁸." A nuclear accident such as Fukushima accuses this break along an unprecedented temporal scale, which excludes any return and breaks with the very possibility of reconnecting with the earth's cycle, for reasons that go beyond the political-economic organization, its temporality, its scale and its reversibility: "If we call the waste that cannot be recycled the 'negative commons,' the post-Fukushima radioactive contamination is perhaps the worst example of it ever known. And this is irreversible⁹." In the face of this situation, which primarily affects the day laborers working around these plants, who are forced to accept radiation, Kohso calls for the "realization" of the commons: "What the postwar process of primitive accumulation robbed them of - land, local livelihoods, family, health, dignity, a permanent residence, etc. - contains the necessity and the possibility of the future. - These struggles contain the necessity and possibility of what we mean by "commune" as the realization of the common. Their struggles require processes of self-organization covering all aspects of care, mutual support, self-defense, etc. "To the irreversible suspension of the conditions of reproduction of life refers the need for a radical reappropriation of the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Collective, *Fukushima and its invisibles*, Les éditions des mondes à faire, 2018. See also the excerpts published in the magazine *Lundi matin* (<https://lundi.am/Fukushima-ses-invisibles>). At Reflections on the negative commons are again reflected in the recent *Radiation and Revolution: Apocalyptic Capitalism and the Struggle for Life in Japan*, by Sabu Kohso (Éditions Divergences, 2021).

⁸ <https://lundi.am/Fukushima-ses-invisibles>

⁹ Art. cit.

commons, starting with the first of them, the earth, without forgetting the waste that must ensure its reproduction.¹⁰

These three analyses share a "family resemblance", despite significant differences in points of view but also in reference points. The negative commons is an organic waste that is part of biotic cycles involving humans, plants, animals and bacteria, and the infrastructure needed to process this waste, which now includes even nuclear waste itself, and goes so far as to designate the threat to the earth's own reproduction cycle caused by an irreversible nuclear accident. The negative commons comes to mean what must be recaptured in order to regain a sense of community extended to non-humans, infrastructures that no one wants individually but that are desirable collectively, or the ultimate waste, that which, by contaminating others, interrupts the cycle of their reintegration by the earth¹¹.

The negative commons as ruins

In 2017¹², before Kohso's publication, and without knowing the work of Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, let alone Himura, I myself proposed to speak of "negative commons" in a rather different sense¹³.

This research was part of a desire to rethink the commons in the light of the reflections then underway on the Anthropocene. The explicit aim was to move away from a sometimes "solutionist" vision of the commons, which was supposed to "save the world", according to the subtitle of a book by Michel Bauwens¹⁴. Now, if the problem of the commons is about how to avoid the appropriation of "common" realities (on more or less large scales), or how to reappropriate what has been captured by the expanding movement of enclosures, there are still all those realities that, conversely, nobody wants. Organic waste is one of them, of course, as is nuclear waste, but beyond that, we have to imagine the landscapes of the Anthropocene, the rejects of the technosphere, abandoned infrastructures, polluted soils, dried-up rivers...

More than the waste torn from human and biotic communities, whose break-up is the only sign of its arrival, the entry point for this reflection on the negative commons was rather the ruin, the one that escapes any desire for appropriation in the mode of enclosure, at the crossroads of personal interest and private property. These "picturesque" ruins, typical of romanticism as well as of a certain imaginary of the Anthropocene, I call them "ruined ruins" (*ruina ruinata*, in the singular). But they are not the only ones. For the most ruinous things today are not the open-pit mines, for example, but the devices that command them to be dug, the economic models that make them profitable, or the supply chains that ensure their export to the four corners of the planet. These technical, managerial, economic and logistical realities are the negative commons that we are inheriting because an ever-increasing proportion of the world's population is linked to them in the short term, even though their operation constitutes the greatest threat to the planet's habitability in the medium term.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lionel Maurel also proposed a reflection on the negative commons in relation to the waste, see "La gestion solidaire des 'communs négatifs', ces déchets non recyclables", Socialter, 13 June 2018.

¹² In an interview with Sylvia Fredriksson in August (<http://notesondesign.org/alexandre-monnin/>), then during a presentation at the Cité de la Mode et du Design, on November 20th 2021, again at the invitation of Sylvia Fredriksson (<https://notesondesign.org/instituer-par-le-design/>).

¹³ See the definition proposed with Lionel Maurel, in Al. Monnin and L. Maurel, "Negative commons", *Politiques des communs*, 2020 (<https://politiquesdescommuns.cc/glossaire>).

¹⁴ Michel Bauwens, with the collaboration of Jean Lievens, *Sauver le monde. Towards a post-war society. capitalist with peer-to-peer*, preface by Bernard Stiegler, *Les liens qui libèrent*, 2015.

The real ruins are less to be found in an imaginary of decadence or decline, of the trace of a more or less bygone, imaginary past, whose political charge is always ambiguous, than in the most ruinous, high-tech realities, in the destructive regime of intensive innovation at all costs and the incessant renewal that it requires. I call this second category of ruins "ruinous ruin" (*ruina ruinans*, in the singular). It is the ruin that is still productive: productive of new ruins, in turn ruinous or ruined. Drawing a watertight and discreet border between the two is often not obvious¹⁵. Oil, for example, has all the characteristics of a ruined ruin insofar as it is the result of the transformation of organic matter from living beings, both animals and plants. At the same time, its energy characteristics make it a "miracle" product for many of the industries it feeds, and the CO₂ that its combustion releases into the atmosphere is eminently ruinous. Similarly, old oil wells combine these two aspects: the wells themselves are like ruined ruins, but the oil in them remains "ruinously productive"¹⁶.

Unlike organic waste, ruins persist over time and are not intended to blend in with their environment, even if they can provide shelter for numerous species, like grounded ships. Provided, of course, that they do not prove too ruinous, like the 25 000 tyres immersed between 1980 and 1989 in the Alpes-Maritimes, off the coast of the protected area of Vallauris Golfe-Juan (Natura 2000), in order to serve as an artificial reef. Over time, the tyres disintegrated, threatening their immediate environment. This is where the notion of "zombie technologies"¹⁷ proves most valuable. Introduced by the physicist José Halloy, it refers to all technologies which, notably because they are not, more or less, part of the major biogeochemical cycles, are destined to survive in a degraded form for particularly long periods. Like zombies, they do not manage to die or disappear. The submerged tyres belong to this category of zombie technologies, unlike the Unicorn ship that Tintin and Captain Haddock are looking for in the almost identical album and in *The Treasure of Rackham the Red*. There is a kind of category error to apprehend these zombie ruins as waste. As much as it is possible to reincorporate organic waste into the earth within an economy based on the commons, it is not possible to do so with the scraps of zombie technology.

The notion of negative commons as I envisage it here is also intended to provide a critique of the notion of negative externality. A negative externality is defined as the unintended result of an interaction between two agents involved in a transaction, the effects of which fall on a third agent who did not take part in the original transaction. However, this concept suggests that it would be possible to detach these consequences or compensate for them, financially or otherwise. However, the extraction of precious metals by children or the poor protection afforded to the workers who manufacture smartphones are not adventitious elements of their production. At this price and on this market, they are quasi-necessities, at the very least, "constitutive" elements of these devices, and not unfortunate consequences to be deplored afterwards. "God laughs at men who deplore the effects of which they cherish the causes," wrote Bossuet. Or, more prosaically: "When you buy a lawyer, you buy the Mexico

¹⁵ On this question, see the first chapter of our recent *Héritage et fermeture : Une écologie du démantèlement* (Éditions Divergences, 2021), written with Emmanuel Bonnet and Diego Landivar.

¹⁶ Meghan L. E. Kirkwood and Daegan Miller, "Orphan Wells," *Places Journal*, June 9, 2021.

¹⁷ José Halloy, Alexandre Monnin and Nicolas Nova, "Beyond low tech: zombie technologies, sustainability and inventions. Interview with José Halloy and Nicolas Nova by Alexandre Monnin ", *Low tech: in the face of the digital age, reclaiming technology*, edited by Isabelle Attard (et al.), Passerelle 21, Ritimo, 2020, pp. 120-128; Mathieu Arnoux (et al.), "Three questions to... Mathieu Arnoux, Christophe Goupil, José Halloy and Éric Herbert on the Interdisciplinary Laboratory des énergies de demain (LIED)", *Lettre de l'INSHS*, November 2020. This notion is also widely used in Emm. Bonnet, D. Landivar and Al. Monnin, *Héritage et fermeture*, op. cit.

that goes with it¹⁸!" In this case, a Mexico subjected to water stress, crop control by drug traffickers, destruction of biodiversity, massive use of pesticides, etc. This is no accident.

The challenge, therefore, is to politicize what was not under the guise of negative commons, by working to identify them: smartphones and 5G, oil and fossil fuels, supply chains, models of attractiveness between territories, neoliberal measures, economic or managerial doctrines out of ground... Investigate them to make them recognized for what they are, at least partially: ruinous ruins that should be inherited to land and transmute them, at least, into ruined or unproductive ruins¹⁹.

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The extension of the negative commons to realities that threaten the world's livability may seem excessive. What is comparable between 5G and oil, or managerial models or the supply chain? However, it is indeed all the elements of what we call the technosphere, by analogy with the biosphere, that make the horizon so problematic. It is therefore necessary to ask the question of their future, which threatens our future existence ²⁰as much as it makes our current existence possible. The negative commons are associated with this political issue of struggle for their identification, in order to limit the ruin they bring.

The question of care is consubstantial with it and is not unlike a dimension associated with the commons in general. The difference is that the care given to negative commons is less about making them last over time than about "landing" them, to use Bruno Latour's expression. Moreover, unlike the traditional commons, determining the scale of the negative commons is a very difficult task. Indeed, there can be no question of leaving collectives alone to inherit realities that generate dramatic situations. This has become the new dogma in crisis management, particularly in the name of resilience, which is a bet on the capacity of populations to absorb shocks after the fact (thus generating social innovations)²¹. On the other hand, the recognition of the negative nature of certain commonalities is a highly democratic issue, the purpose of which is to recompose, after investigation and on the initiative of the groups concerned, new relationships of solidarity between territories and populations that are more or less distant, which remain to be invented - and this is urgent²².

¹⁸ Bruno Parmentier, "When you buy an avocado, you buy the Mexico that goes with it!", Strip Food, 22 June 2021 (at www.stripfood.fr).

¹⁹ In *Inheritance and Closure*, pages 41-45, we propose a typology of relationships with negative commons and the negativity they express.

²⁰ The "we" is obviously very variable. However, the growing extension of the technosphere, despite the inequalities, is an undeniable fact.

²¹ See, in particular, Soraya Boudia and Nathalie Jas, *Gouverner un monde toxique*, Éditions Quæ, "Sciences en questions", 2019. On resilience, see the work of David Chandler, in particular the recent book by David Chandler, Kevin Grove and Stephanie Wakefield, *Resilience in the Anthropocene: Governance and Politics at the End of the World*, Routledge, 2020. I also refer to the first chapter of *Legacy and Closure* where this point is made.

²² On this point, I refer to the text I published on the US city of Centreville: Al. Monnin, "On Negative Commons. The Shadow over Centreville (and Many Other Territories)", in Nicolas Nova and *Disnovation.org*, *A Bestiary of the Anthropocene: Hybrid Plants, Animals, Minerals, Fungi and Other Specimens*, Onomatopée, 2021, pp. 189-199.