

# Towards a Contemplative Commons

Workshop announcement and call for participation

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Given the link between global warming and capitalism (Moore 2016), a central task facing humanity today is arguably the search for a sustainable alternative to our global political economy. Rather than combatting climate change alone, humanity is urged to aim for a systems change (Klein 2014). Systemic approaches that cultivate non-capitalist forms of ownership, funding, decision-making, communication, and subjectivity are already emerging. Post-capitalism has become the subject of much recent debate, spurred by publications from Jeremy Rifkin (2015), Paul Mason (2016), J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006), Left Accelerationists like Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015), and members of Peer-to-Peer (P2P) and Degrowth communities. Though there is no uniform agreement among its proponents, post-capitalism seems generally characterized by a reemergence of the commons.

Realizing a successful transition to a post-capitalist, commons-based political economy will not only depend on the capacity for new technologies and social relations to alter the balance of political and economic power; it will also depend on developing social practices that underlie a broader cultural shift. Though there exists some scholarship on the social and cultural dimensions of a commons-based transition (Bollier and Helfrich 2015, Kostakis and Bauwens 2014, Mulder 2015), there is comparatively little work that approaches the ethical and contemplative dimensions of transformation (nota-

ble exceptions include: Johnson-DeBaufre et al. 2015, Giorgino and Walsh in press). Likewise, though there exists some scholarship on the contemplative dimensions of sustainability (Eaton et al. 2016, Wamsler et al. 2017), very little is situated in the context of the political economy (a notable exception is Doran 2017).

In an effort to bridge these gaps, this workshop seeks to convene scholars and stakeholders who have an interest or expertise in developing ethical and contemplative approaches to post-capitalism and commoning, but who come with different areas and levels of expertise. The main objectives of this workshop are to develop a shared understanding of the status quo (the problem space) and to co-develop pathways that best address this shared understanding going forward.

The workshop will be designed to facilitate maximum dialogue and create collaborative opportunities among the participants. Furthermore, the workshop aims at conceptualizing a platform that addresses the needs of the topic as perceived by the participants in order to offer an outlet for future research on these topics. To achieve these goals, the workshop will be divided into two days. The first day focuses on understanding the status quo and the second day focuses on co-designing a way forward.

**ON DAY 1**, participants will have the opportunity to engage in discussions about their understanding of the topic and the status quo. Enriched by two short key note presentations they will be free to move around, listen to, and contribute to four discussion circles, each focused on one of the following topical areas:

1. **DESIGNING SOCIO-TECHNICS:** Already, there exist vast new technological capacities to restructure material production and social relations using artificial intelligence and machine learning, robotics, nanotechnology, the internet of things, 3D printing, blockchain, biotechnology, and smart systems. Novel forms of social organization are also emerging in anti-proprietary and gift culture movements, open cooperativism, the collaborative commons, guaranteed basic income proposals, worker cooperatives, community land trusts, decentralized renewable energy, DIY and hacker culture, happiness economics, the circular economy, bioregionalism, ecovillages, and permaculture. The fact that these new technological capacities and forms of social organization co-emerge, however, does not ensure a successful transition to a post-capitalist, commons-based political economy. Instead, they only create its conditions of possibility. Though pregnant with potential, new technologies harbor opportunities for capitalism's restructuring as much as they signify the potential for superseding it. Utopian and dystopian possibilities thus compete side-by-side. In this discussion circle, participants will ask how ethics and contemplative practices can provide critical and constructive methods for reflecting on the social and ecological impacts of new technological developments and the possibilities for designing socio-technical systems to transition to a post-capitalist, commons-based society. They will also consider how ethics and contemplative practices might help us navigate the diversity of geopolitical reactions to neoliberalism and the manifold possibilities for conceiving alternative postcapitalisms and commoning practices.
2. **CONCEPTUALIZING RELATIONS:** The idea of the commons fundamentally contests antiquated understandings of Man and Nature, while ushering in a new understanding of human-environmental intra-actions. Repositioning the sciences and humanities within such a situated and relational worldview has consequently created new forms of inquiry in the postnatural sciences and posthumanities. Scholarship on the Anthropocene has given birth to new theoretical and epistemological perspectives emerging in process thought, post-humanism, new materialism, speculative realism, ecocriticism, the environmental humanities, political ecology, and media ecology. In the field of contemplative studies, this shift in understanding appears most visibly in the emergence of embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive (4E) approaches to cognition which provide new ways of understanding how minds and bodies are co-produced in intra-action with environments. In this discussion circle, participants will ask how these new conceptual resources afford us ways to more consciously and sustainably design structures and systems to support ethical values, and it will ask how ethics and contemplative practices might help us to develop the worldviews, mindsets, and social practices supportive of a successful transition to a post-capitalist and commons-based political economy.
3. **PERFORMING POLITICS:** Arguably, the best way to understand the commons is not as a concept or as a thing separated from us, but as a social practice that expresses another way of being in the world, another way of thinking about the world, and thus another way of constantly reshaping and reconstructing the world. As Silke Helfrich says, "commoning is about taking responsibility for common stewardship of resources, processes, spaces and the time we have available together... We should better talk about 'commoning' instead of commons... talking about the commons is talking about

social practices that enable us to build (I would say) a free, fair and sustainable future. Because if we have one political challenge ahead, it is basically coming up with proposals, and concrete social practices, that help us merging three core ideas of political traditions. Which is: Freedom, Equity, and Sustainability” (European Commons Assembly, 2017). In this discussion circle, participants will ask how ethics and contemplative practices help people develop the basic skills and capacities to collectively share and manage resources. How might commoning provide the social and material conditions for flourishing, given both the unequal distribution of risks caused by social-ecological disruption and the fact that we all share-in-difference a more basic existential vulnerability and a dependence on other beings— human and nonhuman— conditioning our pursuit of security and well-being?

4. CULTIVATING INTRA-SUBJECTIVITY: People must accurately assess the complex nature of interlinking problems before they can propose effective solutions, and sometimes the biggest problems people face may not be the systems supporting failure, but the worldview and mindsets underlying the failure of these systems. In the intersectional climate justice movement, there is a growing recognition that inner spiritual conversions that manifest themselves in different sets of values and behaviors also manifest in fundamentally altered social, political, and economic systems. Currently, many people’s needs are met by systems which insulate them from the social and ecological harms most acutely felt in the Global South. Some people may choose never to sensitize themselves to the suffering these systems cause until they collapse. Nevertheless, ethics and contemplative practices provide methods for grounding the often complex, interlinking problems of injustice to a felt presence of these problems in our lives. They allow us to expand one’s sense of self to become-with the world-in-becoming, while allowing us to cultivate a moment-to-moment familiarity with one’s intimate relations to human and non-human others. In this discussion circle, participants will consider how contemplative practices might help us not only become aware of our subjective (cognitive, affective, and sensorial) processes, but also become aware of the social and ecological conditions underlying our existence and the possibilities for transforming perception and behavior “intra-actively” with material transformations.

After participating in discussion circles, participants will harvest and present the ideas they collected, allowing for a generative transdisciplinary dialogue to emerge.

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**ON DAY 2**, the workshop will start with an open forum (world café style) in which the participants can introduce their own topics or ideas for collaboration based on inspirations taken from the first day and based on what they would like to pursue with other participants. The rest of the day will be mainly dedicated to several working groups that discuss in detail what is required and what can be done to build an open-source collaborative platform for developing ethical and contemplative approaches to social transformation and sustainability.

As an outcome of this workshop, we hope to establish a collective process for conceptualizing and constructing “A Contemplative Commons,” which will be built as an open-source web-based platform for ethics-based and contemplative research on social transformation and sustainability. The intention will be to connect ethics and contemplative research in social science disciplines such as sociology, economics, political science, environmental studies, and media studies to various other stakeholders in government and civil society, while offering a common pool of resources and opportunities for conducting future research on these topics.

Finally, in an effort to begin curating material to help build “A Contemplative Commons,” participants will be extended an invitation to write one or more of the following after the workshop:

- Feature Essay - Establishing the Theory/View: 3,000-4,000 word essays that address one or more of the topical areas
- Essays in Response - Exploring Praxis: 500-2,000 word essays that emphasize concrete methods for putting ideas into practice
- Comments in Response - Questions & Future Exploration: 200 - 400 word reflections that raise questions or suggest further directions above and beyond the ideas offered in the discussion circles

We are intent on inviting participants who share an interest and background in ethics-based and contemplative-based social scientific research, who are attuned to the need for social-ecological transformation, and who want to explore the development of ethics and contemplative practices in the context of the Anthropocene and systems change.

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*Please note that attendance at the workshop is by invitation only. However, we will accept a limited number of scholars and stakeholders who have not been previously contacted. If you are interested in participating, please submit a CV and a one-page letter of intent explaining your interest in the topic and how it relates to your work. Requests for admittance can be made up until the start of the conference by emailing Zack Walsh at [zachary.walsh@cst.edu](mailto:zachary.walsh@cst.edu). A limited number of travel subsidies are also available for select participants in need of funding.*

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