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**Commons and the new environmentalism of everyday life.  
Alternative value practices and multispecies commoning in the  
permaculture movement.**

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**Abstract:**

This article seeks to contribute to the elaboration of an analytically solid definition of the commons that can be used to identify organised practices with social transformative potential and aimed at increasing socio-ecological sustainability. I draw on the analysis of political economist Massimo De Angelis who reworks the notion of the commons in line with its growing centrality in the practices and discourses of contemporary social movements. Through the notion of modes of valuation, I expand on his definition of the commons as socio-ecological systems based on alternative value practices. I apply this framework to the analysis of the permaculture movement as a «new materialist movement» grounded on alternative value practices and «multispecies commoning». I discuss the results of a research project on the diffusion of permaculture in Italy to show how the subversive idea of redesigning the subsistence sphere in accordance with principles of earth care, people care and fair share is translated into a variety of «pericapitalist» socio-economic initiatives resting on alternative value practices. I conclude by advocating the adoption of the commons framework to increase the permaculture movement's reflexivity on some of the internal and external challenges it faces.

**Key words:**

value, commons, permaculture, environmental movements, capitalism

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the concept of commons has been increasingly used to refer to a category of goods, a policy approach and, more recently, a political notion and ideal (see in particular Hardt, Negri 2009; Dardot, Laval 2014). Elinor Ostrom (1990; 2005) is the unquestionable reference in the mainstream approach to the commons understood as common-pool resources. However, my intention in this article is to focus on the work of the critical thinkers who try to rework the notion of commons as a potentially subversive socio-political category, starting from the observation of its growing centrality in current anti-capitalist discourses and mobilisations (Linebaugh 2008; Federici 2012).

These re-elaborations of the notion of commons strive to combine analytical strength and political efficacy. In the last decade, the commons have been a central issue in various mobilisations: struggles against austerity policies in Europe, the Occupy movement in the United States, campaigns against the privatisation of natural resources (water, land, forests) and urban open spaces. A lack of clarity on what the commons refers to in these cases has revealed the need for a more formal definition of the concept - one that clarifies its social transformative potential and reduces the risks of «capitalist recuperation» (Boltanski, Chiapello 1999).

Elinor Ostrom’s definition of the commons meets neither of these objectives. Her approach rests on the standard economic understanding of commons as rivalrous, non-excludable goods. Drawing on a large number of case studies, her research programme has sought to identify the features of good institutional design in the management of common-pool resources.

While acknowledging the relevance and empirical strength of her analysis, advocates of a critical approach to the commons disagree with Ostrom’s claim that it is the intrinsic properties of a resource that explain why it is more efficiently used if collectively managed. According to this critique, Ostrom falls into a form of «economistic fallacy» (Polanyi 1977) in considering goods to be private, public or commons because of their objective features. She does not take into account the fact that, as attested in many social struggles today, a group of people can give social meaning to a thing as commons for political purposes. Furthermore, by focusing on mismanagement as the cause of the commons’ destruction, Ostrom is not interested in either their destruction by renewed practices of enclosure or the risk of commons being enrolled to produce capitalist surplus value. Commons thus intended can live in harmony with the capitalist economy and even help exacerbate forms of exclusion, inequality and oppression.

In this article, I will focus on the proposal of the political economist Massimo De Angelis (2006; 2017) to understand the commons as a socio-ecological system structured by *alternative value practices*. De Angelis’ framework is one of the most developed and accurate examples of a critical theory of the commons. The author considers the commons to be the result of a specific kind of human action: alternative value practices. However, this central concept is in need of a more accurate sociological definition. De Angelis’ proposition is thus weakened because the lack of accuracy makes it difficult to precisely identify and analyse different types of dominant and alternative value practices empirically. I propose filling this gap by using the concepts and methods of the *sociology of valuation and evaluation* (Lamont 2012). In general terms, value practices can be defined as those practices through which

people come to agree on what is valuable in a given situation and act accordingly so as to attain and maintain the condition deemed valuable. I will argue that different logics of the valuable, or *modes of valuation*, are detectable in value practices, namely, universal, goal-oriented and «emplaced» (Pink 2009). As discussed herein, dominant value practices are currently structured around universal and standardised goal-oriented modes of valuation, and their aim is economic growth measured in monetary terms. The alternative value practices that structure the commons, as interpreted by De Angelis, are characterised by the centrality that they attribute to context-dependent modes of valuation oriented by the objective of maintaining and reproducing situated human and natural life processes. In order to gain critical strength, value practices of «commonisation» must be guided by the additional objectives of *emancipation*, *social justice* and *ecological sustainability*.

Following this theoretical discussion, I analyse the permaculture movement as an example of a larger category of movements that seek to «commonise» (as opposed to commodify and capitalise) functions linked with basic needs. Many community struggles in the global South take the shape of «commons movements», and now ever more examples of this kind are found in the global North<sup>1</sup>, where the category of commons movements largely overlaps with what David Schlosberg and Romand Coles define as «the new environmentalism of everyday life» or the «new materialist movements» (2016).

More specifically, I will discuss the case of the permaculture movement as an example of both a new materialist movement and a potential commons movement. I will present the results of an ongoing research project on the diffusion of permaculture in Italy to show how the subversive ideas of redesigning the subsistence sphere through what I am going to define as «multispecies commoning» and according to principles of *earth care*, *people care* and *fair share* is translated into a variety of «pericapitalist» socio-economic initiatives (Tsing 2015) resting on alternative value practices. I conclude by advocating the adoption of the commons framework to increase the permaculture movement’s reflexivity on some of the internal and external challenges it faces.

## 2. *Understanding the commons as alternative value practices*

As remarked by Cangelosi (2015, 396), the critical approaches to the commons emerging in the fields of political economy and political ecology share the idea that commons are «actions». In fact, goods and resources - be they private, public or common – do not exist as mere things. It is what we do with mere things, or through mere things, that accounts for their *becoming* «goods» or «resources». In this sense, the commons is the result of an action. But, what kind of action?

Elaborating on these ideas, Massimo De Angelis provides a definition of commons centred on a specific category of actions: *alternative value practices*. Drawing on the works of Elinor Ostrom and Karl Marx, feminist critique and systems theory, he develops an encompassing

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<sup>1</sup>Examples include the Indignados in Spain (Asara 2016) and the French movement of «peasant seeds» (Demeulenaere 2014).

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theory of the commons as a socio-ecological system structured by «alternative value practices», endowed with the potential to challenge capitalism (De Angelis 2017, 11-12). Common goods (which the author calls *commonwealth*) are just one element of the commons; they need to be complemented by *commoners* (the social subjects) and the activity of doing in common, or *commoning*. Commonwealth is «pooled material or immaterial resources» (De Angelis 2017, 119), «social, symbolic, cultural wealth» (*ibidem*, 126), «a stock, but unlike capital the flows it generates possess different goals and it is enacted through different practices » (*ibidem*, 111). Commonwealth thus intended cannot be separated from the existence of commoners and their commoning activity. It is wealth «because a plurality claims it» (*ibidem*, 136). This plurality is the community of commoners, «with their affective and social relations» (*ibidem*, 124). Community is not predicated on a common location, or on a common cultural, political, ideological affinity, or shared class strata. The commoners’ community rests on a certain quality of relations between people and towards the goods and resources that constitute their commonwealth.

Commoning is the activity of doing in common, following self-determined value practices oriented towards the maintenance and reproduction of the socio-ecological system and its components (ecological, social, symbolic and cultural wealth; affective and social relations). According to De Angelis, in order to be potentially subversive, alternative value practices must be oriented by the additional goals of emancipation, social justice and ecological sustainability.

The power to articulate a diversity of values in self-determined ways is thus key to commoning, which is «the production of *the dance of values* as opposed to the capitalist imposition of abstract labour as the substance of capitalist value» (De Angelis 2017, 23, my emphasis).

Consequently, De Angelis’ analysis can be used to identify a process of *commonisation*, that serves as an alternative to the dominant processes of *commodification* and *capitalisation*. Commodification is the process that creates the situation in which exchangeability is the socially valued feature of one specific thing or resource (Appadurai 1986). Commodification is oriented not towards creating commonwealth but towards monetary surplus through selling the commodity on the market. Capitalisation can be defined as a value practice in which the monetary return on investment is the guiding principle (Muniesa *et al.* 2017). Capitalising on something entails either considering it to be an asset, or turning it into one so as to guarantee the production of monetary economic value in the future. Commonwealth can also be considered an asset but, unlike capital, the flows it generates possess different goals. But what do we mean precisely by value practices? And how can we distinguish between dominant and alternative value practices?

### 3. *Value practices and modes of valuation*

From a sociological perspective, value practices are a distinguishable category of social actions. Through value practices, people define what is valuable in a given situation and act accordingly to attain and maintain the condition deemed valuable (Dussauge *et al.* 2015, 10).

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We can study value practices through observing practical activities of *valuation*, *evaluation* and *valorisation*.<sup>2</sup> Valuation refers to the process that makes actors define the good to be pursued through engaging with the social and material environment. Evaluation activities are those concerned with the assessment of a certain value by means of appropriate technologies, spanning from corporeal technologies to technical apparatuses. Valorisation is the use or application of something (an object, process or activity) on a given reality in order to produce a material or immaterial yield.

Based on the results of previous research (Centemeri 2015; 2017), I hypothesise that different «modes of valuation» can be detected in value practices: universal, goal-oriented and «emplaced» (Pink 2009, 27)<sup>3</sup>.

In *universal modes of valuation*, value is abstractly defined. Efficiency, fame, competition, equality are examples of abstractly defined values. Their defining trait is that, when we evaluate and valorize, things must be made commensurable across time and space. These modes of valuation are the result of the historical construction of modern scientific knowledge and universalism (Boltanski, Thévenot 1991). It is important to stress that commensuration is a «social process» (Espeland, Stevens 1998). Commensuration is a cognitive operation that depends on practical arrangements (instruments, tools, rules, norms, etc.) through which things that are different in one’s personal experience of them are formatted in such a way as to be represented as the same (in value). These practical arrangements, or «investments in forms» (Thévenot 1984), have heavily shaped our material reality and they are the result of conflicts, struggles and controversies. The history of the modern measurement systems (Crease 2011) is a good example of the way in which the construction of political universalism entailed the development of appropriate instruments and conventions to shape the world according to this revolutionary political ideal. Universal modes of valuation are crucial to the elaboration of modern ideas of justice, progress and profit but they erase local specificities and diversities.

In *goal-oriented modes of valuation*, value is understood as *use-value* or usefulness for accomplishing an objective. When an individual or a group of actors autonomously define the goal to be achieved, one can speak of an individual or local goal-oriented mode of valuation. However, when goals are imposed from outside, and expressed in terms of quantitative objectives to be achieved across diverse contexts, one can speak of a *standardised goal-oriented mode of valuation*. Consider the difference between organising a working activity with the aim of achieving efficiency, and organising it to reduce the cost of production by 2% in order to be competitive on a market. Everything becomes possible to achieve an externally imposed goal, especially in countries where environmental protection laws are weak and workers have no rights. This is what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015, 63) calls «salvage accumulation» in contemporary «supply chain» capitalism. According to her analysis, exploiting context-dependent value practices in order to make them productive of capitalist surplus via accounting tools is now one of the basic mechanisms to produce profit.

In *emplaced modes of valuation*, value is also experienced in contexts, but not as «utility value». Value is experienced as «encounter value» (Haraway 2008). Barua (2016, 5) argues

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<sup>2</sup> As pointed out by the American sociologist Michèle Lamont (2012, 203), one can speak about an emerging field of «Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation», given the «remarkable number of recent North American and European works [...] concerned with how value is produced, diffused, assessed, and institutionalized across a range of settings». This subfield is heterogeneous: influences come primarily from American pragmatism, French pragmatic sociology, and STS. The journal *Valuation Studies* seeks to provide a meeting ground for the range of studies emerging in this new transdisciplinary field.

<sup>3</sup> My inspiration for the definition of this typology is Laurent Thévenot’s theoretical framework of plural «regimes of engagement» (Thévenot 2001a; 2009; 2015).

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«encounter value» can only be understood if we admit that «human beings do not so much *make* the material world as *play their part* along with other lively creatures in the world’s transformation of itself». Encounter value originates in the experience of «growing with», in which human beings primarily know «along» and not «across» and «up», as extensively discussed by anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000; 2011). In our societies, all kinds of production are conflated with making, but farmers or herdsman are not meant to *make* crops or livestock. Resonance, ease, excitement, affection: these are all valuable and valued experiences in processes in which production is conceived not as making but as growing and knowing along.

#### 4. *The social transformative potential of the commoning of subsistence activities*

Having distinguished these different logics of valuation, we can now try to specify the difference between dominant and alternative value practices. Dominant value practices in the modern organisation of economy are structured in such a way as to establish a clear hierarchy of modes of valuation, in which universal and standardised goal-oriented modes of valuation are prioritised over local goal-oriented and emplaced modes of valuation. This hierarchy of modes of valuation can turn into a mechanism of exploitation as in the above-mentioned example of salvage accumulation.

In contrast, the alternative value practices of commonisation are characterised by the centrality attributed to context-dependent modes of valuation oriented by the objective of *maintaining and reproducing situated life processes*. Note that the commons thus defined is not in itself necessarily antagonistic to other (dominant) social systems: it is simply structured on different value practices. Commons must be oriented by the additional goals of *emancipation, social justice* and *ecological sustainability* in order to challenge the dominant socio-economic order. Universal modes of valuation are important to achieve these objectives.

According to Silvia Federici (2012) and Maria Mies (Mies *et al.* 1999), when the commoning of subsistence activities is guided by objectives of social justice and ecological sustainability, it has a privileged role to play in the critique of capitalism. In fact, as a historical social form, capitalism is based on the instituting of the production economy as independent from the «reproduction economy» (Peterson 2003, 79), with the eclipse of the latter. Picchio (1992) notes that this process explains the progressive dominance of value practices that are not simply «abstract» but «virtual», that is, totally disconnected from the social and material conditions required for the reproduction of human beings.

In Nancy Fraser’s terms (2016), there is a structural «contradiction of capitalism and care» that has been fostering «boundaries struggles» causing major historical shifts in the capitalist organisation of social reproduction. The current «crisis of care», she argues, entails «reinventing the production–reproduction distinction» while re-imagining the gender order; she warns us that the result of such a huge social transformation may not be compatible with capitalism at all (*ibidem*, 117).

The individual and collective engagement in the creation of «emancipatory commons of reproduction» is a possible response to this crisis, a solution that critical thinkers like De Angelis and Federici undoubtedly endorse. In an attempt to explore this hypothesis, I discuss below the case of the permaculture movement as an example of a movement that fosters the *redesigning* of the individual and collective response to basic needs by creating «multispecies commons» (Baynes-Rock 2013), bioregional networks of commons and progressively larger «networks of networks».

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### 5. *Understanding permaculture as a new materialist movement based on «multispecies commoning»*

Bill Mollison (1928-2016), an eclectic bio-geographer turned professor of environmental psychology, and David Holmgren (1955), his student at Hobart University, developed permaculture in Tasmania (Australia) in the 1970s, in a socio-historical context marked by the rise of ecological struggles and countercultural movements both locally and globally. Permaculture has been conceived as a *design method*, «a practical *in situ* approach to creating collectively sustainable human settlements» (Suh 2014, 76), by «assembling conceptual, material and strategic components in a pattern which functions to benefit life in all its forms» (Mollison 1988, 69). The permaculture method considers human settlements as socio-ecological systems that are designed to reduce and optimise the need for energy inputs (including work). By imitating the functioning of healthy ecosystems (a principle of *biomimicry*), the idea is also to design human places of life that ensure the production and reproduction of an abundance of diverse and varied material and immaterial resources. Permaculture was initially intended as a support for the many «back-to-the-landers» (Calvário, Otero 2015) who, in Australia as elsewhere, were moving from urban to rural areas to develop subsistence agriculture despite often being totally unfamiliar with farming. However, the permaculture method is not a set of agricultural techniques. In Mollison and Holmgren’s vision, in a world of declining fossil energy and environmental crisis, environmentalism should shift from contestation to «prefiguration» (Yates 2015). This implies the development of an individual and collective capacity of «permacultural design» and taking direct action to reimagine and reorganise the response to the ensemble of subsistence needs, including education, health, housing, spiritual wellbeing. Permaculture is, consequently, both a design method and a form of «design activism» (Fuad-Luke 2009). It has a subversive potential in that the ecodesign of the modes of individual and collective response to basic needs should be guided by three fundamental principles: *earth care*, *people care* and *fair share*.

Since the 1980s, permaculture has been disseminated through teaching and training, first in Australia and then worldwide by permaculture «pioneers» (Dawborn and Smith 2013) who are mostly itinerant permaculture teacher-activists. Despite its broad international dissemination and high public profile, it has received little systematic scrutiny in the scientific literature (Ferguson, Lovell 2015)<sup>4</sup>.

As a transnational movement, permaculture has quite a loose form of organisation, structured through teaching and training organisations at the local and national level that are grounded in their specific contexts but part of macro-regional networks and progressively larger «networks of networks». These networks involve other movements supporting grassroots initiatives of low carbon transition; examples include the Transition Towns movement<sup>5</sup> and the Ecovillages movement.

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<sup>4</sup> Exceptions are Puig de la Bellacasa (2010), Lockyer and Veteto (2013), Ferguson and Lovell (2013), Suh (2014), Crosby et al. (2014), Rothe (2014).

<sup>5</sup> The initiatives known today as «Transition towns» were first promoted in the UK by a permaculture designer, Rob Hopkins.

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International and regional Permaculture Conferences (called «Convergences») have been held regularly since the 1980s. Moreover, permaculture has been promoted through *demonstration sites*, which range from single-family farms to ecovillages of hundreds of people.

Permaculture underlines the potential of transforming subsistence activities for broader societal change, and calls individuals to take direct responsibility for their own needs while embracing a form of voluntary simplicity. However, it would be mistaken to consider permaculture as a «lifestyle movement» (Haenfler *et al.* 2012) since its aim is to support the bottom-up construction of «bioregional» economic, social and political institutions as an alternative to the existing ones<sup>6</sup>.

Permaculture is better described as a «new materialist movement» (Schlosberg, Coles 2016). Examples of new materialist movements include the movement of farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture (Cone, Myhre 2000), Slow Food (Siniscalchi 2013), the Transition Towns movement. They are related predominantly to food and energy issues and to practices of recycling, repairing and making. In these initiatives, «the development of community movements and institutions – beyond solely individualized action – is purposeful and pointed» (Schlosberg, Coles, 2016 165). In other words, these movements «are being articulated as alternative structures of community organization and material flows, simultaneously, if in different ways, in many communities across the globe» (*ibidem*, 163). New materialist movements largely overlap with what De Angelis defines as «commons movements». However, Schlosberg and Coles clearly highlight the importance of these movements acknowledging the co-constitutive relationship between human beings and the non-human realm, an aspect that is missing in De Angelis’ analysis. At the same time, De Angelis’ focus on value practices is key to understand the social transformative potential of these movements and their internal differences. That is why I suggest considering permaculture both as a new materialist movement and as a commons movement. Its distinctive trait is that it conceives the response to basic needs by creating «multispecies commons».

In fact, when following the permaculture method, subsistence needs are satisfied by means of creating and activating a more or less temporary *community of response*, the configurations of which can vary according to needs and over time. The most original trait of permacultural communities of response is that they consciously involve a variety of beings and entities in addition to human beings. In fact, «working with nature», and not against it, is the golden rule of permaculture; nature is conceived as «an assembly of material, intelligent processes», the results of the interweaving of «heterogeneous and relational actors and artifacts in a continuous process of creating itself» (Rothe 2014, 14). In such a vision, there is no such thing as a natural order to respect but the ongoing production and reproduction of «naturecultures» (Haraway 2003; Latour 1993). The understanding of commons must be stretched in naturecultures to include non-human beings. Multispecies commons thus become visible: they are mutualist and nonantagonistic interspecies entanglements. The permaculture method encourages one to notice these more-than-human entanglements and to make them productive of diverse forms of commonwealth. This implies adopting appropriate value practices.

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<sup>6</sup> On bioregionalism, see McGinnis (1999).

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## 6. *Alternative value practices in permaculture teaching and training*

Permaculture teaching focuses on transmitting a heterogeneous range of knowledge (scientific, practical, experiential) about a variety of topics: water cycle, cartography, ecosystems, climate, «slow» technologies, decision-making tools, and so on. But prior to knowledge, permaculture strives to transmit what I have defined as alternative value practices that must be adapted to «the basic realisation of our interconnectedness with nature» (Mollison 1988, 3).

Permacultural value practices are based on the combination of *ethical principles*, *design principles* and *attitudinal principles*. Design principles are rules of thumb and problem-solving strategies inspired by the experience of human communities’ management of environmental resources all over the world and the observation of ecosystems. Holmgren (2002) provides a concise list of twelve basic permaculture design principles including: «use and value diversity», «use edges and value the marginal», and «creatively use and respond to change». They partially overlap with attitudinal principles that aim to develop a practical wisdom in the approach to the design of ecological complex systems, like «work with nature, not against it» and «the problem is the solution».

Design and attitudinal principles help define strategies of action that must be guided by principles of «earth care», «people care» and «fair share» (or return of the surplus). In permaculture, care and distributive justice are extended from humankind to the many non-human beings and entities that guarantee life is maintained in the biotic community, since «all are our family» (Mollison 1988, 3). Consequently, earth care in permaculture means the care of soil, which is understood in turn as a heterogeneous living community. When teaching permaculture, much time is dedicated to showing the diversity of beings inhabiting the soil (from earthworms to nematodes, caterpillars, fungi, etc.) and their fundamental role in the growth of plants. Largely ignored until then, these beings become the object of interest, curiosity, and sometimes affection for permaculturists.

Caring for the soil not only involves preservation and conservation but also *repair*. In general terms, permaculture is not oriented towards conservation but towards *regeneration*.

Prevention is not enough in the current state of ecological catastrophe: it is necessary to take care of ecosystems, in order to repair them and to regenerate our environments. Regenerating implies being able to renew the bonds of positive collaborations with the «biotic community», as understood by Aldo Leopold (1949), so as to engage in co-evolutionary dynamics beneficial to both humans and the environment: in this sense, it can be said that permaculture is a matter of *re-inhabiting* (Lockyer, Veteto 2013). This implies creating multispecies commons, through value practices that acknowledge and cultivate the existence of heterogeneous forms of (common)wealth: ecological, cultural, material, social, sensorial, experiential. Context-dependent modes of valuation are of crucial importance to this.

My observations confirm that an important part of permaculture teaching involves an investment in reawakening the attention given to the diversity of modes of valuation. For example, when introducing a seminar on «designing a food forest»<sup>7</sup>, an Italian permaculture teacher explains to participants that before addressing the issue of «how to design a food forest», we must first tackle the question of «why we want to design a food forest». He then invites participants to list the «good reasons» for designing a food forest. A final catalogue of

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<sup>7</sup> The permacultural concept of «food forest» is based on the idea of designing a garden emulating a real forest in order to create a low-maintenance «forest garden».

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«good reasons» is compiled with a combination of his own and his students’ suggestions. The list goes from good reasons based on universal modes of valuation such as «the production of oxygen for the planet», «the preservation of traditional species» or «the recovering of environmentally damaged areas », to those based on goal-oriented modes of valuation such as «becoming more resilient», «producing food», «obtaining a monetary revenue», as well as reasons based on emplaced modes of valuation like «having fun and letting animals have fun too», «letting something spontaneous happen», «enjoying sounds», «sharing the experience of the forest with friends». It is particularly interesting to note that the teacher’s suggestions appear to be oriented towards taking the logics of valuation beyond human-centred universal or goal-oriented understandings of value, which were predominant in students’ answers. During the seminar, participants are repeatedly invited to take note of diverse perspectives on what to value, and especially to consider other than human perspectives through an accurate and empathic observation of how non-human beings and elements react and interact in the ecosystem.

Nurturing plural perspectives on modes of valuation in guiding a permaculture design is considered essential. For this reason, it is suggested that, rather than designing alone, permaculturists should always create a *community of designers* in order to benefit from both other people’s previous experiences and diverse perspectives about what to value.

The acknowledgment of value diversity *per se* is a challenge to dominant value practices, in that it relativises their dominance. The way in which the problems of incommensurability (Centemeri 2015) or the «dissonances» (Stark 2009) generated by this plurality and heterogeneity of modes of valuation are dealt with in practice is something that varies across the different permaculture initiatives and explains the observable variety of socio-economic forms of organisation they bring into existence. This point is developed further in the following section in which I discuss some evidence from an ongoing research project on permaculture initiatives in Italy. My analysis is based on several sources of data, in addition to the analysis of a large corpus of permaculture books and writings (in English, French and Italian). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews I conducted with permaculture activists living in Italy, France, Spain, Australia; a survey administered to Italian permaculturists in December 2016; participation in national and international permaculture convergences; attendance of a PDC in Sicily and of two other permaculture courses in Italy; direct observation of permaculture initiatives in Italy. Other data were collected through the analysis of permaculture activists’ blogs, permaculture groups’ pages in social media (especially Facebook) and permaculture magazines and webzines devoted to transition issues.

### *7. Permaculture pericapitalist economies*

In Italy, permaculture initiatives usually develop on abandoned and marginal rural or urban land that is cheaper to buy. Otherwise, land is inherited, donated, rented or granted in usufruct. Whereas the public and private actors/owners of such land do not usually consider them economically valuable, a permaculturist is able to see value and (common)wealth where others do not. For example, in the Saja permaculture project in Paternò (Catania, Sicily), Salvo recalls how, back in 2011, people criticised his decision to use the small capital obtained as compensation for an expropriation to invest in an abandoned citrus grove of

almost 2ha in the Simeto valley: «They couldn't understand that what I was seeing was the abundance of water, not the current state of abandon. Once you have water you can regenerate». Salvo did not just see the potential to produce economic revenue in the land he bought. He recognised the potential to create biodiversity, to have a place where he could offer other people the opportunity to host complementary projects (apiculture, bio-intensive gardening, training activities, yoga teaching), to share knowledge, where his child could grow up in pleasant surroundings, enjoy beauty, live with animals. Salvo's valorisation of his land turns the Saja project, as a socio-ecological system, into a commons. The desolated abandoned land he bought in 2011 is now a fertile polyculture and a socially and culturally lively place. Salvo supports his family through the production of oranges that are sold all over Italy to individual consumers who are mainly Salvo's friends and friends of friends. Although Salvo believes that a good economic result is the best way to convince farmers with monocultures of the viability of permaculture, his activities are not guided by profit but by value practices that take the diverse needs of Saja's biotic community into account. Commenting on pictures of «guilds»<sup>8</sup> in his project's Facebook page, Salvo writes: «if we start to imagine plants as a group of living beings that can have relations not simply of competition (as we are taught in academia) but of beneficial consociation, as for animals living in the same habitat, then we will start to understand that plants are not born in rigid standardised planting patterns (*in sesti d'impianto*) and do not develop the way we would like them to».

This approach to growing plants implies that agricultural practices cannot be guided by standardised goal-oriented modes of valuation, of the kind usually promoted by public funded programmes supporting agricultural development. Locally defined goal-oriented modes of valuation are more suitable for regenerative agriculture, together with openness to emplaced modes of valuation, such as intuition and exploration. The fact is that vegetables are considered as part of a community, which includes human beings, animals and the invisible inhabitants of soil. This more-than-human community has to learn to work together in such a way as to produce and maintain the conditions of its reproduction and wellbeing. This is what I mean by multispecies commoning.

Like many other permaculturists, Salvo prefers not to be involved with public funding mechanisms that make it extremely difficult to pursue the context-specific value practices needed to practice agriculture as multispecies commoning.

A problem of standardised goal-oriented modes of valuation also emerges with the certification of food products. In Italy, many permaculture initiatives are involved in the development of the «Genuino clandestino» network (De Angelis 2017, 294-300) that challenges official systems of food certification, especially for processed foods, through the creation of participatory systems of self-certification and a network of local markets distributing self-certified products. This certification system is based on context-dependent modes of evaluation, while at the same time being guided by the goal of guaranteeing food quality and safety. This «network of networks» is an example of the bottom-up development of an alternative economic institution intended to support local initiatives of regenerative agriculture (whether or not inspired by permaculture). It challenges the idea of standardised evaluation procedures, based on compliance with abstractly defined standards, as the most appropriate to guarantee food quality and safety.

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<sup>8</sup> In permaculture literature, the term «guild» is used to define combinations of mutual beneficial plants.

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Actors in the Genuino Clandestino network try to develop *subversive economies*. The ambition of subversive economies is to radically transform consumption: consumers become not simply co-producers but *commoners*. What distinguishes commoners from co-producers is that the value practices that structure the socio-ecological system they become part of are not oriented towards producing profit but a diversity of ecological and social (common)wealth. Let's take the example of Nicola, from the «Orto di carta» permaculture project in Lessolo (Turin, Piedmont). He defines himself as a «generation 0 farmer», with no previous experience in agriculture or connection with the land whatsoever. Together with his life partner, he has steadily developed an agricultural production «of precision» (according to his definition) on 1ha of land since 2006, inspired by permaculture principles and entirely supported by a group of local families who pay an annual subscription in exchange for a weekly basket of 4 to 5 kilos of vegetables from June to November. As Nicola explained: «when people first contact us, they say they would prefer to buy a basket every week without subscribing. Then, when they get to know us, even if they understand that they cannot choose the products they buy, they subscribe for a year. There are even some families who subscribe on a risk basis and, when there are difficulties, accept they will not receive a basket». In this and the many other examples of Community Supported Agriculture, consumers have to change their consumption habits and adapt to new practices of valuing food. Food ceases to be a simple commodity. It becomes a way of taking part in the production and reproduction of a commons, that is, of a sustainable socio-ecological system that produces and reproduces a culture, a landscape and a community while also producing food.

Agriculture is also practiced through multispecies commoning in Nicola's case. But Nicola is worried by a possible misconception of what I have previously defined as emplaced modes of valuation. He fears that over-emphasising intuition and sensorial experiences as the source of knowledge about nature could be misunderstood as an endorsement of an excessively romantic approach to agriculture. As he explains: «nature is like a colleague to me. I work with nature and I have to know it, I have to be able to engage with it (*relazionarmi*) [...]. I have to know the soil, its biochemistry. [...] Sensibility, analysis by instinct (*a pelle*) is fundamental, but you need to rationalise. Harmony with nature is not in contradiction with planning».

The tension between self-organisation, in which context-dependent modes of valuation structure a socio-ecological system, and public standards and «conventions of coordination» (Thévenot 2001b), based on universal modes of valuation, is at the heart of the difficulties that inevitably face bottom-up initiatives of institution building. As a result, permaculture initiatives sometimes find themselves in a borderline legal position due to legislative voids or norms maladapted to the peculiar hybridity of permaculture initiatives, in which well established frontiers between production, reproduction and consumption are blurred. While some permaculturists consider that trying to change current norms is a waste of energy, for others permaculture demonstration sites are places to experiment new ways of living, working and producing so that evidence can be gathered in the struggle to change the current state of affairs.

This is the case of Giorgia. Together with Francesca, she started the permaculture project «La Tabacca» in 2013 in the hills of Genoa Voltri (Liguria), both as a personal project and as a demonstration site for permaculture design within the framework of activities of the environmental association *Terra!*.

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La Tabacca is an old, half-ruined country house without a connection to the power grid or water supply network, and surrounded by 7 ha of formerly terraced land now abandoned. Giorgia is a former environmental activist in *Greenpeace* and this is how she conceives the project: «The experience of La Tabacca can be a model to show a wider public and institutions a sustainable path for the recovery of the abandoned rural properties that abound in this region». At the same time, she stresses the importance of never forgetting that it is also where she shares her life with Francesca, her life partner. The fact that the two women run an agricultural project together and live together as a couple is also considered a challenge to the established cultural codes that can foster broader cultural change. However, it is not always easy to manage the tensions that emerge when one’s place of life is also a demonstrative place of practices of commoning.

Every technical and design problem at La Tabacca is an opportunity to imagine and actively create a community of response and to devise innovative solutions that can be shared with others, locally and in the larger community of permaculturists. For example, one of the reasons behind the decision to rebuild the ruined house using straw bales was that it provided an opportunity to involve people in learning about the technique when volunteering on the building site, creating networks with local producers of straw and the national and international network of bio-constructors. Cost cutting is not the overarching principle guiding decision-making. Nevertheless, Francesca and Giorgia are funding the entire renovation themselves, reinvesting part of their salaries and some family money, so it is very important to keep costs to the minimum.

La Tabacca is a good example of the way permaculture demonstration sites usually operate. They are places in which people live and work (typically a couple or a small group of people), developing an economy based on agricultural production for domestic use and exchange, small-scale commercial agriculture connected with alternative networks of distribution, sometimes small-scale livestock farming, training and education activities (with monetary or in-kind payments), responsible tourism (with monetary payments), hospitality in exchange for voluntary participation in work activities (woofing, workaway, etc.). Some initiatives focus mainly on self-sufficiency, experimentation and the creation of non-market economies. Other permaculture projects evolve in niches of the formal economy. They all share the goal of ecological sustainability. Public funds can partially support them, usually for their social and cultural activities. Nowadays, many permaculture initiatives in Italy are involved in activities to help refugees.

A clear post-capitalist alternative does not emerge from the diversity of permaculture initiatives. What emerges is a variety of «pericapitalist economic forms», that is, economic forms that are both within and outside the value logics of capitalism (Tsing 2015). In commons terminology, these initiatives try to create socio-ecological systems through alternative value practices oriented by principles of care and fair share. Their social transformative potential is linked to the ability to include the objectives of emancipation, social justice, ecological sustainability and to build local networks of commons, through «boundary commoning» (De Angelis 2017, 287), and progressively larger networks of networks. It also depends on the capacity to examine the dangers and opportunities of the compromise with dominant value practices.

Permaculture pericapitalist economies are still rare, young and fragile. At this stage, their survival is dependent on the creation of strong mutualistic networks. The Sicilian permaculture network (federating around 50 permaculture initiatives) shows the importance

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of creating such an organisation. On the last weekend of each month, members of the network meet for «mutual aid» (*mutuo aiuto*) at one of the network sites so as to help with labour-intensive tasks (terracing, constructions, earthworks, etc.). Sub-regional networks are now being created in Sicily with the same purpose, with meetings planned on a weekly or monthly basis. This too is an example of commoning, intended as «a moment in a network of reciprocity (reciprocal labour)» (De Angelis 2017, 23). However the Sicilian case is still an exception in the Italian scenario, even if other local and regional networks are growing (in Sardinia, Piedmont). The Italian Academy of Permaculture<sup>9</sup> is actively trying to sustain these dynamics and their integration in a variety of transnational networks, like the European network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability (ECOLISE).

### 8. Concluding remarks

Permaculture initiatives question, if not openly contest, the hegemony of dominant value practices. The alternative value practices through which they organise their activities are grounded primarily on what I have defined as context-dependent modes of valuation. In fact, the common objective of permaculture initiatives is to maintain a local system's generative capacity over time to produce diverse kinds of context-specific wealth (material and immaterial).

However, if permaculture initiatives are to avoid other than spatial forms of «remoteness» (Plumwood 2002, 72), they have to take into account the goals of social justice and ecological sustainability – that rely on universal modes of valuation – so as to build forms of solidarity that extend beyond the local. The awareness of the risk of other than spatial forms of remoteness is a strong antidote against autarchic interpretations of bioregionalism. However, there is a real danger that the quest for self-sufficiency can turn into «privatism» (de Leonardis 1997) or «defensive localism» (Pellizzoni 2016). In his study of American «peakists», a category partially overlapping with that of do-it-yourself permaculturists, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2015) emphasises how their generalised skepticism in public actors reinforces conservative principles of individual choice, reliance on the free market, and the need for a smaller state.

My research partially confirms this trend but shows a more complex picture. People can embrace permaculture as a way of pursuing political engagement and as a form of activism by other means. In many cases, permaculture comes in response to a situation of economic and/or existential crisis, including activism burnout. Far from turning into a form of individualism, the quest for a permacultural self-reliance can often lead to active engagement with «microworlds» (Chateauraynaud, Debaz 2017), that is, socio-ecological initiatives locally grounded but connected, in different ways, to broader open-ended dynamics.

As anthropologist Anna Tsing remarked (2015, 134): «Every livelihood patch has its own history and dynamics [...]. Since no patch is representative, no group's struggles, taken alone, will overturn capitalism. Yet this is not the end of politics». In this respect, permaculture exemplifies this «patchiness» well. Allowing diverse visions of socio-economic change within the permaculture movement is coherent with an approach inspired by complexity theories, for which change cannot be linear and diverse strategies must be pursued. This

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<sup>9</sup> The Italian Academy of Permaculture currently has 390 active members. It is the biggest association in Italy supporting permaculture training and it is the third national association in Europe in terms of active members.

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diversity can be «hopeful» but it calls for «a politics with the strength of diverse and shifting coalitions—and not just for humans» (Tsing 2015, 135). The permaculture movement is thus characterised by openness to «hybridisations» (Tosi and Vitale 2009), in that it aims to be adjustable to a variety of cultural and political contexts and sensibilities

A more explicit reflection is still required, however, on how to discriminate between good and noxious coalitions and hybridisations. The adoption of the commons framework of analysis could be of great assistance in this reflection. Such a reflection is urgent due to permaculture’s growing success; this is accompanied by the risk not only of permaculture turning into a new profitable market but also of reactionary interpretations of permaculture, that is, as a method and practice supporting autarchy and the need to respect a presumed «natural order» in agriculture and society<sup>10</sup>.

Karl Polanyi was already aware that reactionary and emancipatory endeavours of commonisation coexist inside the constellation of actors of the «protective countermovement» responding to the expansion of the logics of commodification. The framework of analysis I have discussed in this article is an attempt to contribute to distinguish between these two opposite directions of the countermovement. It is also a contribution to the development of a critical theory that tries to encompass the three intertwined dimensions of the capitalist crisis we are presently living through: ecological, social and financial (Fraser 2014). It points to the need to rethink the sphere of subsistence as a place where to experience self-valorisation, self-determination and self-organisation while nurturing the awareness to live in more-than-human communities.

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<sup>10</sup> In France, for example, the far-right movement *Egalité et Réconciliation* promotes this distorted interpretation of permaculture.

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