

## Preface

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It is always difficult to know where a book begins and where it ends. The origins of this book most likely lie far back in my own past and, ultimately, in the historical roots of humanity. Put somewhat less philosophically, while I was growing up I would often ask myself if 'this' is the only 'reality' that has ever existed. By 'this reality' I meant – in an unconscious and general way – the prevalent form of social organization based on competition and economic monetary growth, or what most people call 'capitalism'. It always seemed strange to me that human beings are ever so intelligent, yet appear to have set up rather peculiar organizations and institutions in which they seem to be forced to perpetually accumulate wealth, ultimately undermining the ecological and socio-political conditions of their own existence. Furthermore, I was for some reason always suspicious of the widespread belief that humans are independent beings and that freedom is primarily considered as the non-interference of others. I always had a hunch that people's existences depended on one another and that these interdependencies also include the ecological webs that people find themselves in. These intuitions have not let me go since and have led me to deal with these issues in a more fundamental, theoretical and systematic manner. Even though this book was originally written as a dissertation, the intellectual endeavor was never merely an exercise in arm-chair philosophy, nor was it ever solely aimed towards an academic audience. Before beginning this book, I was inspired by numerous commons projects, such as housing cooperatives and community supported agriculture, that opened my eyes to 'another reality' or another way of organizing social activities and life in general. These people rejected the belief that the invisible hand of the self-regulating market will look after them and took their economic activities and fates into their own hands by democratically self-regulating their common realities. But soon enough, I realized that commons were not merely charming niches in a belligerent environment. Instead, these shared realities and the cooperation that results from them constitute the bedrock of all of life.

Such a perspective radically puts into question the narrative that Western societies have been telling themselves for some time now: that life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Thomas Hobbes). Obviously, a positive and optimistic

understanding of reality can easily be put off as naive or utopian. Yet this positive take on humanity and reality does not mean that everyone should get along and live in harmony with one another. Instead, I believe that the way we understand ourselves influences how human beings interact with each other, with non-human beings and with 'nature' in general. Theory is not merely an objective analysis of a given reality, but influences what type of world is created. Simply in virtue of their mutual interdependence as living beings, human beings co-create their common realities whether they like it or not. That is one of the main points being made in this book. And that's why theory matters. It is in this sense that commons and basic forms of democratic cooperation can be understood as fundamental pillars in the constitution of reality. Yet democratic cooperation implies that conflicts are not suppressed or wished away, but actually dealt with through confrontation, negotiation and deliberation. And commons provide the institutions and organizations where this can take place. Yes, commons and democratic cooperation are difficult and tiresome. Hence only by *thinking* of reality as shared can people be empowered to claim their rights in the democratic organization of their interdependent lives in the form of commons. This path is stony and strenuous. And I believe that only by taking these ideas seriously is it possible to reconcile human freedom with ecological flourishing.

This being said, a book on commons can never be understood as an individual endeavor or achievement. As already mentioned, I was deeply inspired by the many people who initiate and maintain all sorts of commons projects. In this sense, I am largely indebted to the many commons activists who already paved the way to this book by formulating these activities, organizations and institutions into words, arguments and theories. These include the people from the Commons Institute in Bonn, including Johannes Euler, Silke Helfrich and Stefan Meretz, and those from my regional community supported agriculture project *ortoloco* in Zürich, such as Tex Turtschentaler, Christian Müller, Ursina Eichenberger and many others. Within academia, I am extremely grateful for the institutional and financial support from the National Centre of Competence in Research "Democracy – Challenges to Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" and the Doctoral Program in Democracy Studies at the University of Zurich. Even though my topic did not fit into any single academic discipline, I nevertheless was made to feel welcome to pursue my interests and research rather freely. At the University of Zurich I am otherwise extremely thankful for Urs Marti-Brander's time, support and critical comments, who, being my first supervisor, was probably the most difficult person to convince with my arguments. I am also grateful for my second supervisor, Francis Cheneval, for his work on democratic theory and his critical feedback on my work. Furthermore, I appreciate the feedback I received in the colloquium for political philosophy at the University of Zurich. A big thanks goes to Alice El-Wakil for her collaboration and support throughout the doctoral program and in the academic association Democ-

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