

# Disposable time as a common-pool resource

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## Introduction

About a decade ago, I wrote a short piece about "labour power as a common-pool resource" that got picked up by Michel Bauwens of the P2P Foundation and led to me being invited to a conference on the commons in Berlin put on by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. I would now like to amend that to regard *disposable time* as the common-pool resource in question. Much of my original rationale applies as well or better to the new formulation. I am assuming that all of this will be new to most readers.

Common-pool resource is a category of goods introduced by Elinor Ostrom in work for which she was awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009. For Ostrom, common-pool resources are goods that don't fit tidily into the categories of either private or public goods. They are like private goods in that their use by one consumer subtracts from how much is available for others. But they are like public goods in that it is difficult to exclude people from access to them. Some obvious examples are forests, fisheries, aquifers and the atmosphere. Ostrom distinguished between common-pool resources that are unregulated and "the commons," which is collectively self-managed. From this distinction came her criticism of Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons," which assumed an unmanaged common-pool resource rather than a collectively self-managed commons.

Disposable time is a much older and more ambivalent concept. Usually people assume it refers to leisure, which they conceive of as recreation or idleness. Traditionally, though, leisure was associated with education, culture and self-improvement and was mostly an exclusive privilege of the upper classes. In part, disposable time embraces that older conception of leisure but universalizes it. But in his *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx added another dimension to disposable time by also associating it with labour time that was in excess of what was necessary for subsistence. Thus, labour time that is superfluous to what is necessary for the workers' subsistence could be at the disposal of capital for the production of surplus value.

## Labour is not a commodity

Labour was conventionally regarded as a private good by both classical political economists and conservative thinkers such as Edmund Burke, who argued, "labour is a commodity like every other, and rises and falls according to the demand." The counterpoint to that view, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is that labour (power) is *not* a commodity because it has characteristics that no other commodity has. Robert Prasch has summarized

these characteristics: "(1) Labor cannot be separated from its providers. (2) Labor cannot be stored. (3) Labor embodies the quality of self-consciousness. (4) Labor is the one "factor of production" that most of us wish, in the end, to see well compensated."

The negative claim was officially endorsed in Section 6 of the U.S. Clayton Antitrust Act, passed by Congress in 1915. Hailed by American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers as a "Charter of Industrial Freedom," Section 6 proclaimed that "the labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce." Nearly identical wording was incorporated into the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 as a guiding principle for the establishment of the International Labour Organization and reaffirmed as a first principle of the I.L.O. in 1944.

The everyday experience of working people, economic policies of governments, bargaining priorities of trade unions and theoretical models of economists would seem to conform more to the commodity model than the idealistic but nebulous proclamations of the Clayton Act and the Treaty of Versailles. But an early rationale for the rebuttal was outlined in 1834 by silk weaver William Longson in his evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Hand-Loom Weavers:

...every other commodity when brought to market, if you cannot get the price intended, it may be taken out of the market, and taken home, and brought and sold another day; but if a day's labour is offered on any day, and is not sold on that day, that day's labour is lost to the labourer and to the whole community...

Longson concluded from these observations of labour's peculiarities that, "I can only say I should be as ready to call a verb a substantive as any longer to call labour a commodity."

Another formidable challenge to the notion of labour as a commodity had been articulated nine years earlier by Thomas Hodgskin in his *Labour Defended Against the Claims of Capital*. Hodgskin pointed out that the most important operation for the production of wealth, "the rearing of youth and teaching them skilled labour, or some wealth-creating art." As Hodgskin continued, "this most important operation is performed... without any circulating capital whatever," that is to say, without compensation in either money or goods. Instead, child rearing is performed, "under the strong influence of natural affection and parental love... through all the long period of the infancy and childhood of their offspring."

In both Longson's and Hodgskin's arguments, the unstated distinction between labour and labour *power* was crucial. No actual labour was performed in Longson's example. What the labourer offered on the market but was unable to sell was his or her capacity to work on that particular day. Similarly, what parents give to their children by bringing them up and teaching them skills is a capacity to labour, provided the opportunity arises to

exercise that capacity. Wage labour *per se* only comes into existence after the capacity to labour has been purchased and combined by the employer with facilities, equipment, raw materials and direction.

### Labour power as a common pool resource

Human mental and physical capacities to work have elastic but definite natural limits. Those capacities must be continuously restored and enhanced through nourishment, rest and social interaction. Over the longer term that capacity for labour also has to be replenished by a new generation of youth, reared by the previous generation.

It is this combination of definite limits and of the need for continuous recuperation and replacement that, according to Paul Burkett, gives labour-power the characteristics of a common-pool resource. As Burkett explained, Karl Marx also regarded labour power not merely as a marketable asset of private individuals but as a "reserve fund for the regeneration of the vital force of nations." "From the standpoint of the reproduction and development of society," Burkett elaborated, "labor power is a common-pool resource – one with definite (albeit elastic) natural limits."

Here is where I would amend Burkett's definition to designate disposable time -- rather than labour power -- as the common-pool resource. The rationale for doing so is that the working day consists of two distinct parts, one of which is the labour time necessary to provide for the subsistence of the worker and the worker's family and represented by the wage. The second part of the working day is labour performed to create value that is taken by capital and is referred to as surplus labour time or surplus value. The proportion of surplus labour time to necessary labour time, however, is not a constant and changes with changes in the length of the working day and the productivity of labour.

### Disposable time as a common pool resource

In his *Grundrisse*, Marx identified surplus labour time as a form of disposable time. That is to say that, under capitalism, it is labour time at the disposal of capital. "The whole development of wealth," Marx wrote, "rests on the creation of disposable time." "In production resting on capital," he continued three sentences later, "the existence of *necessary* labour time is conditional on the creation of *superfluous* labour time."

Although it strongly suggests surplus labour time -- and thus surplus value -- *superfluous* labour time is not identical to surplus labour time. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx discussed disposable time and superfluous labour time as characteristics of any human society, not exclusively historical capitalism. It is the unique characteristic of capitalism that it subordinates the performance of necessary labour to the production of surplus value. Thus, under capitalism, superfluous labour time takes on a new function, a large part of which is indeed the production of surplus value. But that is not all, as Marx explained two paragraphs later. In its drive to create as

much surplus labour as possible and "to reduce necessary labour to a minimum," capital also has a tendency "to increase the labouring population, as well as constantly to posit a part of it as surplus population - population which is useless until such time as capital can utilize it." Superfluous labour time thus implies surplus population alongside surplus labour time.

Regardless of whether one works for a wage or is unemployed, the capacity to perform labour is the outcome of an intrinsically social, co-operative activity. As such, this capacity can best be understood, at least in part, as a "common-pool resource" in that it may most effectively be engaged, valued, enjoyed and protected as a collectively-shared asset rather than as a fragmented assortment of individualized units, which is the current model of labour-as-a-commodity. Relating the concept of a common-pool good to labour is especially apt in that it illuminates, as Burkett points out, "the parallel between capital's extension of work time beyond the limits of human recuperative abilities [including social vitality], and capital's overstretching of the regenerative powers of the land." However, there is also an important distinction between wealth, which can be accumulated and preserved, and those subsistence goods that must be consumed directly to sustain life and enable work to continue. Social production would cease if the producers themselves were denied the goods necessary to their sustenance. Therefore it would be logical to regard only the produce of disposable time, that is superfluous labour time, as goods held in common.

### Social costs and common-pool resources

The basic idea behind common-pool resources also has a venerable place in the history of classical political economy and neoclassical economic thought. In the second edition of his *Principles of Political Economy*, Henry Sidgwick observed that "private enterprise may sometimes be socially uneconomical because the undertaker is able to appropriate not less but more than the whole net gain of his enterprise to the community." From the perspective of the profit-seeking firm, there is no difference between introducing a new, more efficient production process and simply shifting a portion of the costs or risks onto someone else, society or the environment. In fact, the opportunities for the latter may be more readily available.

One example Sidgwick used to illustrate this was "the case of certain fisheries, where it is clearly for the general interest that the fish should not be caught at certain times, or in certain places, or with certain instruments; because the increase of actual supply obtained by such captures is much overbalanced by the detriment it causes to prospective supply." Sidgwick admitted that many fishermen may voluntarily agree to limit their catch but even in this circumstance, "the larger the number that thus voluntarily abstain, the stronger inducement is offered to the remaining few to pursue their fishing in the objectionable times, places, and ways, so long as they are under no legal coercion to abstain."

Applying the same principle to the context of labour-power, "fishing in the objectionable times, places and ways" manifests itself in the standard practice of employers considering labour as a "variable cost." From the standpoint of society as a whole, unemployment is simply a way of shifting the overhead cost of labour onto society as a whole. John Maurice Clark discussed this cost-shifting aspect in the 1920s in his *Studies in the Economics of Overhead Costs*, especially his chapter on "labor as an overhead cost."

### Withholding labour

Superficially, it might seem that the individual worker can deny access to an employer offering unsuitable terms. But it is here we need to factor in that peculiarity of labour-power noted by the silk weaver, William Longson that a day's labour not sold on the day it is offered is "lost to the labourer and to the whole community." "If his capacity for labour remains unsold," Marx agreed, "the labourer derives no benefit from it, but rather he will feel it to be a cruel nature-imposed necessity that this capacity has cost for its production a definite amount of the means of subsistence and that it will continue to do so for its reproduction."

This contingency and urgency of employment effectively undermines the worker's option of refusing work. The option of refusing work at unsuitable wages or conditions is further undermined by competition from incrementally more desperate job seekers – a population Marx famously referred to as "an industrial reserve army," a more dramatic name for the relative surplus population he analysed in the *Grundrisse*.

The pervasiveness of unemployment from the paid labour force collaterally stigmatizes and marginalizes unpaid work. For example, "welfare to work" schemes require single parents of young children to take low-paid work that often forces them to depend on unsuitable child care arrangements. Such rules discount the social value of parenting work but are enforced on the grounds that public assistance recipients are employable.

There are no barriers to entry to unpaid work and relatively few credentials awarded for doing it. Thus mobility from unpaid care work to paid employment is impeded. Work done outside the paid labour force rarely counts as work experience. Instead, the time away from paid labour depreciates accumulated skills and credentials.

### Common-pool property rights

Two key features of Ostrom's analysis: the distinguishing of a spectrum of separable property rights rather than monolithic "ownership" and the use of a grid that classifies goods according to how difficult it is to restrict access to them and the extent to which one person's use of a good subtracts from what is left available for others.

Schlager and Ostrom identified a bundle of property rights pertaining to natural resources that they defined as follows:

1. Access: "The right to enter a defined physical property."
2. Withdrawal: "The right to obtain the "products" of a resource (e.g., catch fish, appropriate water, etc.)."
3. Management: "The right to regulate internal use patterns and transform the resource by making improvements."
4. Exclusion: "The right to determine who will have an access right, and how that right may be transferred."
5. Alienation: "The right to sell or lease either or both of the above collective-choice (management and exclusion) rights."

The labour-as-a-commodity view actually restricts the scope of the wage earner's property right to the right to sell all the other rights (alienation!), while a common-pool resource perspective could grant access and withdrawal while retaining the three collective-choice rights.

Ostrom's matrix of goods is illustrated in the following diagram:

		Subtractability of Use	
		High	Low
Difficulty of Excluding Potential Beneficiaries	High	Common-pool resources: groundwater basins, lakes, irrigation systems, fisheries, forests, (disposable time), etc.	Public goods: peace and security of a community, national defense, knowledge, fire protection, weather forecasts, etc.
	Low	Private goods: food, clothing, automobiles, etc.	Toll goods: theaters, private clubs, daycare centers

*Figure 1.* Four types of goods. Source: Adapted from E. Ostrom, 2005: 24.

I've added "disposable time" to Ostrom's examples of common-pool resources to reflect Hodgskin's observation that skilled workers are the product of many years of unpaid care work ("under the strong influence of natural affection and parental love"). It would be extremely difficult to exclude potential beneficiaries from the resulting "good" (skilled labourer). A similar "common-pool resource" designation follows from looking at income employment as the "good" from the perspective of the worker.

## An ecological subject

In "Foundations for Environmental Political Economy," John Dryzek explored the prospects of an environmentalist economic subject, "Homo ecologicus," as an alternative to the traditional rational actor or economic man. Dryzek criticized previous efforts at positing an ethical, environmentalist subject, saying they were flawed by wishful thinking and reductionism. The alternative Dryzek proposed instead was based on his Ostrom's case study work on managing common-pool resources.

The alternative political economy would be one that can account for instrumental rationality – even deploy it in its proper place – but that also can point to alternatives grounded in something firmer than wishful thinking. Dryzek's alternative doesn't rely exclusively on subjectivity but also considers inter-subjectivity and communicative rationality. In Ostrom's work, what distinguished the successful case studies was communication and interaction between individuals. Participants learned to identify whom to trust, discern the effects their actions will have on others and on the shared resource, behave more "straightforwardly" toward each other and build institutional arrangements for resolving conflicts. This alternative subject, then, is habitually inclined toward social cooperation rather than atomistic individualism.

Successful institutions of the type identified by Ostrom rarely come into being through explicit contracts. More often they evolve through long periods of informal, collective learning about what works and what doesn't. Another approach to these institutions would involve more deliberate experimentation with institutional innovations. For such institutional reconstruction to take place, however, it is essential, Dryzek cautioned, that participation "move beyond the narrow community of political economists and political theorists and into society at large." Evaluating disposable time as a common pool resource could be one such deliberate experiment.

## Disposable time as a model for environmental governance

Not only could disposable time be regarded as a common-pool resource similar to other common-pool resources, but it could stand as the single most far-reaching and democratically vital model of a common-pool resource. Donald Stabile alluded to something in this vein when he noted that, "Human labor is also the primary constituent of the society whose values must be part of any criterion of social evaluation. The appropriate starting point in any policy directed at social costs is with those imposed on labor."

In "Accountants and the Price System: the Problem of Social Costs," Stabile focused on the perspective introduced by John Maurice Clark in his *Studies in the Economics of Overhead Costs*. Clark argued that labor should be considered as an overhead cost of doing business rather than as a variable cost of the employing firm

because the cost of maintaining the worker and his or her family in good stead has to be borne by someone, whether or not that worker is employed. "If all industry were integrated and owned by workers...", Clark explained, "it would be clear to worker-owners that the real cost of labor could not be materially reduced by unemployment."

Commenting on the efforts by some accountants during the 1970s to change the way social costs were accounted for on the corporate account books, Stabile concluded that those accountants had not developed useful concepts for examining social costs. To explain why they had failed, Stabile relied on the perspective on social costs set forth by Clark and by K. William Kapp in which analysis of the social costs of labor is central to a process of social evaluation. Such an outlook was missing from the works of social cost accountants, "Market values are a weak thread from which to hang a whole system of value," Stabile argued, "but accountants cling to it doggedly. Without an alteration of this basic tenet of accounting, social cost accounting cannot develop into a criterion of social value."

Returning to Clark's example of the hypothetical state where all industry is integrated and owned by workers, there is an instance of a non-market process of social evaluation whose results can be worked out with little hesitation, unemployment would be regarded as sheer waste rather than as an unfortunate but necessary measure for accumulating surplus value. Social accounting for unemployment would come to a very different assessment of economic "efficiency" than would a narrowly financial one from capital's perspective.

Simply regarding disposable time as a common-pool resource would not automatically result in managing work as a commons. It is instead an important preliminary step that offers a rich conceptual framework for guiding the development of concrete policy proposals, research agendas, strategies and experiments. Such strategies and proposals can borrow from and combine experience in the governance of resources such as fisheries, forests and watersheds alongside lessons from trade union movements of the past and present and from feminist struggles for recognition and valuing of caregiving work.

Innovations that result from synthesizing such diverse experiences may seem disturbingly unfamiliar from the traditional perspective of viewing labour as a commodity. That is why it is important to not only foster an understanding of disposable time as a common-pool resource but in the process to not lose sight of what the traditional perspective entails and what is the relationship between the two views. In some of the most visionary lines of the *Grundrisse*, Marx rhapsodized about a future beyond the social contradictions of capital in which wealth is measured by the quantity of alienated labour time that capital is able to accumulate. In contrast to grim scenario, Marx briefly outlined a society in which disposable time become the measure of wealth:



For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time. Labour time as the measure of value posits wealth itself as founded on poverty, and disposable time as existing in and because of the antithesis to surplus labour time; or, the positing of an individual's entire time as labour time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker, subsumption under labour.

The degradation of individual to "mere worker" has its counterpart in the degradation of the earth to "mere resources," to be extracted, refined, and manufactured as quickly and extensively as possible into commodities. Conceiving of disposable time as a common-pool resource establishes a framework for understanding and resisting both forms of degradations.