

“The Uncommon Commons”

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I would like to begin by thanking Lau Kin Chi for inviting me to this forum and to the many of you who worked hard to make this forum happen. I feel honored to be here and am so very impressed with the way you have organized this forum to create dialogue and the sharing of ideas. I look forward to continued conversations with all of you in the future.

I begin my paper with some reflections on the structuration of the world from the positioning in which I find myself and then move to imaginative resources that I find important for imagining a future that is sustainable and based on social justice.

We are living through a massively unstable re-structuring of the post-Cold War world. Despite the early pronouncements in the West that the Cold War is over, much of the world is still living through the after-effects of its supposed end, and will do so for some time to come. The tearing apart of Syria, the re-arrangement of alliances in relation to the Israeli occupation of Palestine and indeed a wide range of unstable movements to re-arrange the entire Middle East and West Asia, in both more democratic and more authoritarian directions, from Morocco to Turkey to Iraq and Afghanistan, are precisely the manifestation of these after-effects. These after-effects manifest in different ways in various regions in addition to the Middle East, such as Latin America, Asia and southern Africa. The “post-socialist” countries are thus not “post” in the sense of having buried socialism deep in the past; rather they are “post” in the sense that post-colonial theory has argued: a moment of grappling with the interstices of creating an Other world, and, in the current era, negotiating the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism that keeps producing as a counter-effect various revisionist histories of the socialist past, as scholars such as Dai Jinhua and Neda Atanasoski have argued and that Wang Hui argued in his paper on Thursday.

This is a struggle to make governments around the world more accountable to its citizens – or maybe we should say not to forego its former accountability in the wake of worldwide transformations through neoliberal capitalism. In the capitalist West, the political end of socialism – as distinct from its ongoing source as an imaginary of a future based on social justice – the political demise of socialism withdrew pressure on capitalist countries to provide for their citizens. It enabled the vicious backlash by elites across the U.S. and Western Europe, which we are still struggling with. This struggle is what makes current movements so heightened, violent and ongoing.

I have always been an anti-imperialist, with a focus of course on the U.S. imperialist ventures that have caused so many damaged lives around the world. Positioned as I am from within the U.S., but fully aware of U.S. imperialist ventures that have, all my life, intimately linked my world to the worlds of all those whose lives have been upended by U.S. military interventions, what feels overwhelming at the moment is the rise of authoritarian populism. Just a short time ago, we thought we saw on the horizon a worldwide movement of progressive governments taking the place of various authoritarian holdovers from the days of military dictatorships. But we had failed to appreciate the depth of their necessary intimacies with multinational capitalism. This authoritarian populism is based in a popular common sense that liberal democracy has failed. It has failed to meet ordinary people’s needs. It has failed to

address the yearnings of ordinary people for a stable, livable life. Those people, whom we used to call the working class, have risen to support authoritarian leaders. They are quite correct in this aspect of their diagnosis that liberal democracy has not met their needs. Yet they have channeled their discontent and anger through nationalism and, in the case of the U.S. and Western Europe, through racist and anti-immigrant sentiments. Here, Arlie Hochschild's recent book [get title] is illuminating in her description of poor whites in the southern United States, who feel, in their own metaphor, that others have jumped in the line before them to get, in their view, welfare that they don't deserve. Thus, unlike in the 1930s, when fear of popular support for socialism led capitalist democracies to institute a wide range of social welfare programs, today, elites fear nothing of the kind.

I want to thank Muto San for emphasizing the need to decolonize the mind. In all my years of teaching and engaging in activist work, I have tried to make this my main goal: to decolonize the mind of those in the U.S. who do not see the U.S. empire for what it is. I have always been struck by the fact that most Americans do not connect their lives directly with the effects of U.S. empire. In fact, they rarely think about the U.S. empire at all. This with the exception of course of all those peoples who have fled military dictatorships that the U.S. supported and fled to the U.S. to escape, especially from Latin America. But others go about their daily lives without acknowledging the nature of the empire that makes their lives liveable. [IF TIME, GET KALI'S PIECE ON MONDOWEISS] Otherwise, how could people possibly accept the ridiculous idea that Saddam Hussein was allied with Al Qaeda. In the United States, there is a concerted effort not to educate, or to actively block education that would make the U.S. empire visible to American citizens. I want to thank Mireille for mentioning Palestine. Palestine is a good example of this suppression of knowledge. I have been actively working for Palestinian rights for a number of years now. In the U.S., Israel is the only country in the world for which Congress and state governments are willing to go against the Constitution. In the last 5 years, there have been one after another laws introduced that try to suppress speech critical of Israel, by falsely equating that criticism with anti-Semitism – this despite the fact that the loudest critics of Israel in the U.S. are Jewish and the loudest supporters of Israel are not just right-wing Zionists but people – like Trump – who are actually anti-Semitic. I myself have been brought up on charges 3 times for holding events for which I was accused of fostering anti-Semitism, this despite the fact that all the participants in these events were Jewish, including a group of Israeli soldiers against the occupation. Yet, I must also point out that there has been a significant shift among people of color in the U.S. in their positioning in relation to Palestine/Israel. The Black Lives Matter movement explicitly discusses the slogan from Ferguson to Palestine. Native American activists have made close ties with the struggle for Palestinian rights in addressing the ongoing resistances to settler colonialism. And Palestinians have been working to educate these different activists about how to deal with tear gas, and other more contemporary forms of violence used against them. The Asian American Studies Association was the first to pass a boycott resolution against Israel. The Chicano Studies Association followed suit, as did the National Women's Studies Association.

The situation of Palestine is an index of how the world has moved towards authoritarian populism, not only including within the 1967 borders of Israel, where it has amplified the settler colonial power of Israel, but also some of the countries in the Middle East that are now willing to ally with Israel. Authoritarian populism has challenged the seemingly stable set of international arrangements during the Cold War that lulled many into thinking another world war was not possible. Now we can glimpse that possibility again.

We have neoliberal capitalism to thank for this situation and we also have nationalism intersecting with racism to thank. But while neoliberal capitalism unites elites in some respects, authoritarian populism clothed in nationalism, also means elites in different countries must choose which kind of authoritarian leader they will support, which in turn might upend their previous global aspirations. The history of Nazi Germany resonates very much today. Take Trump. The terrible irony is that progressives in the West have long opposed the various free trade agreements, such as instituted by the World Trade Organization (WTO), that Trump is now seeming to shake up and perhaps tear down. They opposed them on the grounds of their injustice toward working-class subalterns. Yet, progressives – at least those located in the U.S. - never clearly distanced themselves from the nationalism that was part of the political unconscious of their positioning. They have not fully committed to a post-nationalist world. Now we have authoritarian populist leaders railing about the need to close the borders not only against what they view as unfair trade arrangements but also against all the others whose lives, upended by the effects of U.S. empire and its efforts to continue to maintain hegemony in the post-Cold War world. Thus, the set of unstable contradictions in this current moment.[Thus the ability of authoritarian leaders...]

In the United States, there is of course an obsession with the so-called rise of China. Here, I think we might find Laura Doyle's work on inter-imperiality useful. We must examine both elite and non-elite actors in what Doyle calls their "inter-imperial positionality" to examine how they shape economic, material and cultural practices in this new post-post-Cold War (to use Dai Jinhua's phrase). In the case of the so-called rise of China, we might hesitate, however, before invoking the term "imperial." It is perhaps too soon to make that pronouncement.

In the U.S., as I said, we hear anxious talk about the so-called rise of China. Indeed, China has changed dramatically in the last thirty years, as it has embraced in an experimental fashion the global capitalist economy and fiercely promoted a culture of consumption within China. This pursuit of wealth is motivated through the long *durée* history of colonialism in China since the mid-19th century. Up and through the present, Chinese public discourse and history textbooks include continuous discussions of that history, in part because that history motivated the socialist revolution and the rise of the Communist Party to power. In addition, we also find a strong nationalism that has been decoupled from socialism, and re-coupled with global capital.

That China's pursuit of wealth has led to its increased presence in various regions of the Global South is clear. The Chinese state is mainly interested in gaining access to greater energy resources in order to develop its own domestic economy, which now increasingly relies on intensive consumption of energy resources. In this pursuit, the Chinese state has called upon a variety of different approaches for different regions. Thus, it has not tried to impose one homogeneous means for interacting with quite distinct governments and peoples. And again, it has been experimental and supple in its various strategies. Indeed, one characteristic of the Chinese state throughout the socialist era and after has been its experimental nature.

For example, with many African nations, China has invoked their mutual socialist past of shared politics and China's ongoing support. During that socialist past, China was intimately tied to various socialist countries and movements in Eastern Europe, Africa and southeast Asia. China had offered financial and food aid as it tried to fashion a third world alternative to both the Soviet Union and the United States. China pulls on this past history to describe its current activities. What do we make of this current narrative of south-south cooperation? (See the debate between Yan Hairong and C.K. Lee.) China offers a great deal of infrastructure building in

various regions. They describe this as support for other nations' ability to pursue their own development. They also point out how much this differs from the interventions of the U.S., which, they assert, never offered concrete aid. The types of infrastructure being built – roads, dams, ports – also support China's extraction needs. But the Chinese state is also willing to build that which a particular government requests, with no direct relation to China's extraction needs. The Chinese state also takes a strong public stance of non-interference in the governance of other states. This is partly due to its opposition to criticisms of human rights violations within China, and partly due to its interest in investing in countries no matter the form of their governments. But again, it poses itself in direct opposition to the U.S. model of imperial interference.

Doyle's work and that of others working in world history and international relations rightly emphasize the interactions between the imperial powers and their representatives, on the one side, and local populations, on the other. In the case of China, focusing on ordinary Chinese migrants is essential. Indeed, Chinese immigrants to various African, Latin American, and Southeast Asian countries have lived in those regions for several centuries, long pre-dating this recent so-called rise. Thus, it is important to focus not simply on the Chinese state, or to homogenize all Chinese actors. Derek Sheridan (2017), for example, has examined the fraught relationship between Chinese state actors and ordinary Chinese migrants in Tanzania or, as he puts it, the differentiation between actions taken in the name of the state – and not just the Chinese state -- and actions by those who feel more vulnerable. Sheridan, in the spirit of Doyle, gets us past binaries of homogeneous groups: *the* Tanzanians versus *the* Chinese. In examining the complex dialectics and multiple differentiations among Tanzanian state officials, Tanzanian street bureaucrats, Chinese state company employees and Chinese migrant small shop owners, Sheridan addresses the central question of “contested vernacular theories about the relationship between imperialism, power, and status; and in turn, contested expectations regarding the Chinese state in the world.” (2017) How, he asks, “does one determine privilege or vulnerability when one party has the economic capacity to pay while the other has the sovereign capacity to detain?” Moreover, there is an ongoing set of disagreements among various Chinese in Tanzania about the following question: are the vulnerabilities of global Chinese citizenship caused by an unwilling state [a state unwilling to back them up] or are they the result of the insufficient ethics of private Chinese citizens?” This question in turn raises the large issue of the relationship between privilege and power, on the one hand, and risks and vulnerabilities on the other. How are these distributed and how do the relations among them operate?

Mingwei Huang's work (2017) examines cross-ethnic, cross racial relations and the matter of racism. Huang emphasizes the various racialized intimacies that shape the racial hierarchies between Chinese traders and African workers in Johannesburg, South Africa, the racializing practices that are central to capital accumulation by Chinese entrepreneurs in Johannesburg, South Africa. As she argues, “the ever-expanding frontiers of global capital forces movement and transgression, and in the process unmoors norms of race, gender, class, and sexuality.” Huang creatively tracks the broader arenas of intimacy, such as hands changing money, sharing toilets and rubbing up against one another in narrow aisles. In other words, intimacy in the realms of public life. This is terrifically insightful, because these kinds of intimacies are not so easy to police, and defy easy categorization but at the same time are absolutely central to the feelings of anxiety that Chinese traders feel that keeping racial hierarchies intact are never secured. Ironically, it is the very idea of pollution that draws some Chinese migrant traders to South Africa. They think South Africa's air is clean. Are we witnessing disruption here or rather a more ambiguous set of practices that both re-enforce and

transgress all at once? The use of different terms like overseas, migration, diaspora point to different relationships to China and to the country of residence.

Of course, other people important in this process are the non-elite ordinary citizens of the countries in which China's presence is becoming increasingly evident. In Latin America, for example, what has struck me most about China's interventions there is that, unlike in Africa, the Chinese state-owned companies do not bring the majority of employees from China but rather hire local labor. Perhaps they have learned from some of the intensive labor conflicts in places like Zambia (CK Lee).

This has affected the interactions between local people and those Chinese working for state-owned companies. At least that is the case in Argentina. In my own work on China in Latin America, which I am just beginning, I have found, in Argentina at least, a wide range of views on China's presence. Again, most Argentinians do not have any contact either with Chinese companies or Chinese people. Chinese migrants are now the majority of small grocery store owners; if an Argentinian has an opinion about Chinese, they will most often point to the grocery stores. Among scholars and journalists, one finds more detailed attention paid to China's presence. Among this latter group, I have found a very self-conscious inter-imperial positioning, not to mention in some cases anti-imperial positioning. But also important to note is the wide range of views about China's presence in Argentina. Some, like Luciano Bolinaga, talk of a "Beijing Consensus" having replaced the Washington Consensus. They believe China is building an economic hegemony in Latin America that is "re-primitivizing" the Latin American economy. That is, China is forcing Latin America into a position of under-development, as a source of natural resources for which in return China presses its own manufactured products. Moreover, China fails to pass along the manufacturing technologies, knowledge and resources to take the next step in turning raw natural resources into products, such as soybean products. Ninety-five percent of Argentina's soy is sold to China. Indeed, the rise in soy production in Argentina is in direct response to Chinese demand (Rachel Cypher).

Others do not cast blame on China but instead blame their own government for its never-ending corruption, failure to initiate any development projects on its own, crushing debt burdens, and therefore failure to care for its people. These latter welcome Chinese investments. What would one call this position? There are still others who welcome Chinese presence in order to counter the U.S. This would be the case in Venezuela. Others feel it is vital for Argentinians to educate themselves about China and Chinese culture in anticipation of a future, more personally felt relationship with China. Two Argentine journalists have dedicated themselves to starting a new journal, whose title is the Chinese name *Dangdai* (当代)(meaning: the Contemporary Era): *Primera Revista de Intercambio Cultural entre Argentina y China*.

In returning to the "inside" of China, it is worth noting the ideological work that Chinese state-owned film companies are performing to support China's increased presence in the global south. The *Wolf Warrior* set of films is a case in point. They are the highest grossing films in recent years. In a cultural commentary series on *Wolf Warrior II*, a group of international scholars analyze the film's representations of China's presence in Africa (in Chinese at : <http://routerjcs.nctu.edu.tw/router>; coming soon in English at u.osu.edu/mclc/). The Chinese hero saves the "good" Africans from African terrorists who are backed by an American mercenary. This film is for a domestic Chinese audience. Its complex mix of goodwill and nationalism lays the groundwork for broad support of the Chinese state's ventures abroad. But its inevitable contradictions have also lent themselves to broad criticism from within China.

This is a moment of flux and transition within the global economy. China, certainly more than the U.S. offers the opportunity to address this situation with a commitment to social justice.

This moment of flux and transition has many cracks and gaps through which other possibilities emerge. Given that this panel is about the commons, I want to emphasize the importance of finding sources for other imaginaries of a world fundamentally based on social justice. These sources for an imaginary not based in the current viciousness of insecure capitalist pursuit of profits are already in existence. At the broadest level of social justice, we must address the incipient destruction of the earth and its livability, not only for humans but for all living creatures.

Maristella Swampa, an Argentine scholar, offers one piece of this imaginary. Swampa argues that rather than talk about a passage from a Washington consensus to a Beijing consensus, instead we should talk about what she calls the commodities consensus. If the Washington consensus was based on financial valorization, then the commodities consensus is based on large-scale exportation of raw materials. In dialogue with other Latin American scholars addressing these concerns, Swampa describes the commodities consensus as a process of ‘re-primarization’ of Latin American economies, orienting those economies toward what she and other scholars call “neo-extractivist developmentalism.” Swampa and others define neo-extractivist developmentalism as “...the pattern of accumulation based on the overexploitation of generally nonrenewable natural resources, as well as the expansion of capital’s frontiers toward territories previously considered nonproductive.” Neoextractivist developmentalism is characterized by large-scale enterprises, a focus on exportation, and a tendency for monoproduction or monoculture. Its emblematic figures include strip mining, the expansion of the petroleum and energy frontier, the construction of large hydroelectric dams, the expansion of the fishing and forestry frontier, and the generalization of the agribusiness model. They are capital intensive, rather than labor-intensive, activities. The commodities consensus is built on the idea that there is an irrevocable or irresistible character of the current extractivist dynamic, resulting from growing global demand for raw materials.

Unlike the Washington consensus, which defined the state as a meta-regulating agent, the commodities consensus establishes greater flexibility for the state’s role. Swampa argues that progressive governments are caught up in the commodities consensus, as it enables them to fund social programs for the most vulnerable from extractivist rents, thus operating in tight association with multinational capital. Thus, in the Latin American setting we see the coupling not only of neo-extractivist developmentalism and neoliberalism, but also of neo-extractivist developmentalism and progressivism. This coupling of neo-extractivist developmentalism and progressive governments has led to a decrease in democracy, as they pursue what Swampa calls “a belligerently developmentalist discourse, accompanied by a practice of criminalizing resistance.” Thus we find inevitably the movement of progressive governments toward more traditional models of domination, linked to the classic nation-state model. These progressive governments opt for using a nationalist language, negating the legitimacy of claims and attributing them either to “infantile ecologism” as in Ecuador, or to the actions of foreign NGOs as in Brazil.

Despite this criminalization of resistance, one consequence of the current extractivist turn has been the explosion of social-environmental conflicts, with 120 mining conflicts affecting 150 communities in 2010, rising to 198 conflicts involving 297 communities by 2014. Most striking, in Swampa’s view, is the articulation between different social actors, including indigenous-campesino movements, social-environmental movements, environmental NGOs, networks of

intellectuals and experts, and cultural collectives. “These struggles recognize new languages for valuing territory and natural resources... and the valorization of local knowledges, often with campesino-indigenous roots.”

To challenge and overturn this neo-developmental extractivism, promoted by transnational corporations, hegemonic actors of the extractivist model, and progressive governments that believe extractivism is the quickest path to progress and development, Swampa emphasizes the cultural battle in material and symbolic realms in relation to new ways of thinking about the good life in relation to environmental justice. Swampa argues that “a large part of the Latin American Left and progressive populism has maintained a productivist vision of development, which tends to privilege the conflict between capital and labor, minimizing or giving little attention to new social struggles concentrated on territory and the commons.... In this political-ideological framework dominated by the productivist vision, the current dynamic of dispossession becomes a nonconceptualizable blind spot. Social-environmental problematics are considered secondary or expendable in the light of the severe problems of poverty and exclusion in Latin American societies.” Instead, we should abandon the ideology of progress and the confidence in the infinite expansion of productive forces. This is based on what she calls, borrowing from Dumont and Mattin, models of bad development (*mal desarrollo* in Spanish). The concept of bad development “illuminates both the failure of development programs as an ideal, a promise... and the different dimensions of “bad living.” “Bad living” encompasses not only the increased poverty of marginalized communities but also the hegemonic ideology of a mode of life based on infinite consumption but which leads to the destruction of the very bases of potentially viable modes of living.

In place of this ideology of bad development and bad living, Swampa proposes three concepts. The first is what is called in Spanish *buen vivir*, or good living, an indigenous concept across Latin America. *Buen vivir* emphasizes a new relationship between human beings and nature, by de-commodifying nature. By “nature,” the concept encompasses not only human relationships to the land but also to other, non-human living beings, challenging anthropocentric logic. *Buen vivir* also emphasizes the abandonment of the idea of development as unlimited growth, the promotion of ways of valuing activities beyond financial profit, and a recognition of the rights of nature, meaning the defense of life systems and the intrinsic value of nature itself independent from human valorization. *Buen vivir* leads to ecological justice, “whose objective would be not to charge fines for damages but rather to engage in environmental recomposition independent of its economic cost.” Thus “sustainable development” and the “green economy” are insufficient for addressing environmental justice.

The second concept is “communal ethos.” By communal ethos, Swampa, inspired by Ecuadorian Bolívar Echeverría, means “fields of collective experimentation that reclaim the production and reproduction of the common, beyond the state and the market.” Common goods are not understood as commodities; their value is not measured in prices. Emphasis is rather on “the use value of things, their practical consistency, as opposed to capitalism’s structuring principle, which emanates from exchange value and becomes autonomous as capital-value.” They are also to be distinguished from “public goods,” which Swampa argues “are the dominion of the state and therefore are subject to states exercising their jurisdiction without obligation to consult communities.”

Finally, Swampa emphasizes an eco-feminist notion of the “ethics of care.” This notion highlights the parallels between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature – minus previous essentialisms -- through invisibilized and nonrecognized reproductive labor.

This ethos of care further emphasizes a socially and ecologically sustainable society, through values such as reciprocity, cooperation, and complementarity.

Although Swampa is quite critical of what she views as the contradictions in the actions of the states of Bolivia and Ecuador, I think we should still retain two important innovations that we can admire: one is the recognition in their constitutions that nature has rights. As Swampa herself states, this is a new concept horizon. We should pause here because the implications of recognizing that nature has rights has multiple possibilities. Certainly, a regime of rights is not where we would want to end, but where we want to begin. Here at least, in this moment, we can begin to demand accountability for the destruction of non-human life on this planet. We could begin a process of reparations to the earth.

The other innovation is Ecuador's recognition that it is a "plurinational state." Passed in 2008, Ecuador's constitution resignifies the country as a "plurinational state," one that affirms the sovereignty of the Indigenous and Afro-descended groups within it. The Ecuadoran constitution also has another innovation: the definition of family as diverse. These changes were due to many, many years of work on the part of Indigenous communities that later allied with queer activists. Christine Keating and Amy Lind argue that these re-definitions have a certain logic of multiplicity and open-endedness and lead the way to recognition of non-normative families. While Keating and Lind acknowledge that the actual implementation of these aspects of the constitution have been "limited, compromised and forestalled, they nonetheless conclude that these changes are important "institutional resistance to the coloniality of power in Ecuador."

I turn to another source for creating at the level of the imaginary a set of concepts to help us imagine the commons: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, in their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* take inspiration from life in Black communities. Rather than speak of the commons, they emphasize the undercommons. Their argument is that vernacular social life already contains alternative economies of giving, taking, being with and for. As they state, the undercommons is "...a space and time which is always here." We can seek to create new modes of collective life but we should also not leave behind those ways of life that already have been in alternative modes for a long time, since these communities have been so marginalized that some of these modes were not visible and thus not eradicated. The undercommons is "...the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities [playing in a band, old men sitting on a porch, chatting] [that] is already present." The undercommons is in everyday life, especially the lives of the marginalized. The undercommons is a place that continuously produces its own un-regulatedness, or lack of regulation; it is ongoing and exists in the present. As Harney and Moten say, inspired by Fanon "You are always already in the thing that you call for and that calls you." We are always "on the way to the place we are already making." Harney and Moten talk about the curriculum of the Mississippi Freedom School during the 1960s in the southern U.S. This curriculum posed two questions to the people they were working with: What do we not have that we need? But also, what do we have that we want to keep? This latter question presumed that African Americans in the South had something they wanted to keep, no matter how oppressed they were. And that they wanted to organize themselves around the principle that they did not want everything that their oppressors had.

The undercommons is peopled by those whom colonialism and capitalism have rendered as nonentities. Thus the undercommons helps us to work towards "...the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense.... To bring colonialism to an end, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other...who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism."

Again, inspired by Fanon they argue that “...blackness...is the willingness to be in the space that has been abandoned by colonialism, by rule.”

The undercommons is that place where people have the right to refuse that which has been refused to them. It is the refusal of the choices offered. “And in this refusal, we can reshape desire, reimagine possibility and do so separate from the fantasies nestled into rights and respectability.” In the undercommons, people refuse what Harney and Moten term “the call to order.” And it is also the refusal to call others to order – that is, the refusal to be the police who hail the subject into interpellation and the re-instantiation of the law.

The undercommons is not satisfied with recognition from a system that denies “a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart ...the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other.” The goal is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed. In their essay on the university, The undercommons of the university is where study gets done outside of the structuring of the university.

The undercommons is the place where we prepare for the future we cannot yet imagine through what they call “study”: a mode of thinking with others that trains us to be “with and for” and not just in antagonism against. This is study as opposed to knowledge production. The undercommons is the place of what they call fugitivity, which is not just escape or exit a la Paolo Virno but means literally not settling, not being fixed into position, always being in Deleuzian motion. In an indirect critique of the civil rights movement in the U.S., Harney and Moten argue that the undercommons refuses the false image of enclosure, “the unreal idea that we must correct ourselves in order to protect an illusory right to what we do not have”: “in the moment of right/s the commons is already gone.”

People in the undercommons are not invisible to capital but there “always elaborations of social life that are not comprehended or exploited by capital. Capital, in its agency, just doesn’t get it, necessarily.”

Finally, life in the undercommons involves improvisation of the relationship between necessity and freedom. This gets us to the issue of debt and affective communities. Global capital, under the Washington Consensus, developed in a way that protects investors from any risk in their investments, especially when they invest in other nation-state’s economies. The humanitarian disasters we have witnessed in Greece, brought on by the European Union but largely by Germany and the outrageous and preventable disaster in Puerto Rico testify to the need for a global, progressive re-imaginining of the issue of debt. David Graeber has suggested a “jubilee” that would forgive the debt. But I think we need to do more and put forth an agenda in which “debt” is something that cannot be repaid and will not be repaid. Harney and Moten call this place of bad debt the “fugitive public.” But rather than think of it as ultimately fugitive, I like rather their emphasis that we need another sense “of what is owed that does not presume a nexus of activities like recognition and acknowledgement, payment and gratitude.” “Credit,” they argue, “is a means of privatization and debt a means of socialization.” As we know from the study of non-capitalist societies, debt is a way to bind communities together; the debt should never be fully or finally repaid.

I believe that progressives also need to get a lot better at building affective communities. Religious communities are very good at that, but progressives have built their politics on the assumption that rational thinking is all we need to bind ourselves to one another. If we examine liberation theology, or more recently progressive versions of Islam as among the younger

generations in Malaysia, we can see they encompass critiques of capitalism's devastations along with the building of communities that are affectively tied to one another. In this way, we will be better at refusing the definition of what is a "better life" that, as Swampa argues, appears associated with the democratization of consumption, but in the frame of the dominant imperial mode of life. Instead, we need new imaginations with respect to consumption and the relationship with the environment, based on a different theory of social needs.