



## Feminist political ecologies of the commons and commoning (Editorial to the Special Feature)

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## Feminist political ecologies of the commons and commoning

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It has been almost a decade since Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009 and transformed in no small measure, environmental governance studies. On the one hand, her alternative ideas on polycentric governance, collective action and commons management created legitimate space and authority for grassroots structures to self-govern the commons. Less visibly, her work also enabled a storming into masculine spaces of political science and economics (Wall 2014). Viewed through a feminist perspective, these acts were both profoundly political. And yet, although her work ‘challenged many extreme neoliberal concerns by emphasizing cooperative behaviour and the possibility for solutions not involving private property’ (Forsyth and Johnson 2014, 1106)—it did not [re]politicize the field of new institutional economics, i.e. allow a critical analysis of how power operates in commons management (Łapniewska 2016). This special issue offers a set of papers that defend the pertinence and value of integrating power and power relationships in the analysis of the commons, from a feminist perspective.

Political ecologists have for long unpacked the construct of the ‘commons’ and notably questioned that ‘local agendas are inherently more legitimate [or inclusive or just... and/or less] neoliberal’ (Robbins et al. 2012, 327) and linked local commons management with broader social, political and economic structures and processes (Blaikie 1985) and environmental discourses (Escobar 1996; Forsyth 2003). Similarly, the growing field of critical institutionalism has explored how institutions are embedded in everyday life, meanings and power relationships (Cleaver and de Koning 2015). For more than three decades, feminists have been engaging in the study of the commons, with early works from Mies and Shiva 1993; Agarwal 1995; Rocheleau et al. 1996. Recently, various researchers have studied the ‘commons’ as alternatives to neoliberal capitalism (De Angelis 2007; Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Gibson-Graham et al. 2016). An emerging strand of commons studies places ‘commoning’, instead of the commons, as the central analytical object (Linebaugh 2008; Bollier and Helfrich 2015). Commoning can be understood as a process of making and remaking of the commons—and a feminist perspective to commoning gives a particular attention to the everyday practices, social relations and spaces of creativity and social reproduction where people come, share and act together (Federici 2011, 2019). This work resonates with feminist and feminist political ecology (FPE) scholars’ concerns on a disembodied construction of the commons, the collective and the community (Sultana 2009; Federici 2011; Nightingale 2011; Elmhirst 2015). These new trends all testify to the critical juncture at which this special issue on FPE perspectives of the commons and commoning comes—at a time when environmental commons are at a renewed risk of commodification.

Commons literature has historically tended to compartmentalise as well as eulogise the role of communities in natural resources governance. Political ecologists have stressed how neoliberal designs of environmental governance embroil different institutions at scale (Goldman 2001; Castree 2011; Joshi 2015;

Kashwan et al. in press). In other words, inclusive and just governance can hardly be claimed to be synonymous with a unique model of community-based resource management, operating in isolation from the outer world, a stance that resonates with polycentric governance debates (Andersson and Ostrom 2008). FPE further ‘complicates arenas of assumed common interests, such as ‘community’ and ‘household’ (Elmhirst 2015, 519) by studying gendered relations within and beyond these arenas, to national and international scales (Rocheleau 2008; Ahlers and Zwarteveen 2009; Harris 2009).

A key contemporary multi-scalar collective action issue is that of climate change. Much of the discourse on collective action in relation to climate happens without much attention to the consensualisation and de-politicisation of climate change (Swyngedouw 2011). FPE helps draw focus to the centrality of the gender dimension of power, difference and divide in climate change and environmental discourses, notably in arenas beyond the community (see Shrestha et al. 2019). It is important to note that FPE scholarship does not see gender as the ‘end point of critique and analysis. (...) People are seen as inhabiting multiple and fragmented identities, in which gender is but one axis of difference’ (Elmhirst 2011, 130–131). To that extent, gender is ‘the process through which differences based on presumed biological sex are defined, imagined, and become significant in specific contexts [and is] constantly (re)defined and contested’ (Nightingale 2006, 171). The intersection of variables, termed ‘intersectionality’ is, ‘an approach to gender that studies the interconnections amongst various dimensions of social relationship and subject formation’ (Elmhirst 2015, 523). Another central concept in FPE is that of ‘subjectivities’, which refer to how one understands oneself in a social context activated by situated power relations. For FPE scholars, gender is not a fixed and stable identity, but rather a process through which subjectivities are constituted and performed through discourse and everyday practices (Butler 1997; Nightingale 2006).

Finally, FPE acknowledges that ‘values do enter processes of scientific reasoning’ (Łapniewska 2016, 143). This critique of what is presented as science, allows one to deconstruct how, for example, Ostrom segregated her experiences as a female scientist, so that her views on gender and science became disassociated from her scientific work. FPE scholars instead boldly position themselves politically and as feminists in their research, and this positioning is explicit in their writing and analysis (Harcourt and Nelson 2015). In this special issue, we seek to challenge hegemonic masculinist conceptions and practices of knowledge production through in-depth case studies that analyse the implementation of hydropower projects in India (Shrestha et al. 2019) to knowledge production in higher education international classrooms in the Global North (Harcourt 2019).

Having set out briefly how FPE intersects with the study of the commons and commoning and its core concepts of gendered power relations (gender, power, subjectivity) across scales and intersectionality we now move onto outline three further areas of scientific enquiry in FPE which are central to the papers of this special issue.

## I. Power, knowledge, and everyday practices/experiences

Whereas scholars from the Bloomington School have studied variables that represent power distribution such as the socioeconomic attributes of actors and knowledge of social-ecological systems (SES) (Ostrom 2007), they have not explicitly considered power as a variable of interest. By contrast, FPE interrogates structural forms of power that define inequality and differentiated access and control of resources through multiple forms of social difference such as gender, class, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality and nation. Feminist engagement with power ranges from early ecofeminist marxist writings, who interrogated the invisibility of women's subsistence work and their specific gendered contribution to the commons (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999). More recent FPE analyses uses Foucault's (1979, 1991) description of power and processes in governmentality and highlight 'a more complex and messier, notion of "gender"' (Mollett and Faria 2013, 116), that intersects with class, ethnicity, religion, caste, age, and other categories. Harcourt (2019) also challenges neocolonial conceptions and practices of knowledge production by taking a postdevelopment FPE approach. Post-structuralist FPE scholars consider discursive forms of power that influence knowledge production and institutional legitimacy. FPE, like political ecology, places the operations of power on the analytical centre stage utilising the 'theoretical lenses of political economy, human agency, material nature and discourse, conflict and competition, governmentality and the creation of environmental subjects' (Resurrección 2017, 71). Again, what FPE adds to political ecology's concern for social justice issues in environmental change is a feminist analysis of gendered power relations and difference.

FPE scholars understand power as operating both horizontally and vertically so power is not only expressed in vertical oppressive and hierarchical relations but also horizontally in intimate connections that are embodied and emotional among humans and environment. FPE scholarship sees gender as part of intersecting relations of power that challenge the binary construction that men are visible, dominant and powerful and women are invisible, weak and passive. Instead FPE refers to gendered power relations as changing and complex historical processes that are shaping economic, social and cultural institutions and that deeply inform social, political and economic decisions. Power operates through difference that occurs not only among genders (men and women and the gender in-between) but also at the 'intersections' or overlays of gender with other socio-economic and cultural systems such as race, age, class, ability and caste. FPE looks at how gendered power relations are shaped by everyday interactions with embodied, ecological, technological and political-economic processes, embedded and contested in people's actions and experiences in the environment. FPE analyse how people have diverse experiences of, responsibilities for, and interests in 'nature' and 'environments', which vary by gender, class, race, culture, and place and are subject to individual and social change.

FPE studies look to understand how the everyday, embodied interdependencies among humans and environment are played out in commoning practices. FPE therefore aims to do research with communities in order to understand how local people live, feel and understand the environment and the agency of other-than-human beings, or what Val Plumwood calls 'Earthothers' (Plumwood 2002). In undertaking engaged research, FPE scholars aim to do non-extractive research which is based on experiencing and learning from communities' responses to environmental change in a participatory co-production of knowledge. Such analysis pays attention to how power operates at the daily level in practices of care and well-being that make up communities' economic and ecological negotiations around the management of shared resources in commoning practices.

Following this understanding of power, one of FPE's focus is how communities respond to socio-natural and economic changes in everyday struggles and political organising for well-being in situations of inequality, exclusion and economic poverty (Nightingale 2019). In addition, an FPE perspective pays particular attention to the narrative or framing of community and collective in relation to climate, economic and environmental changes, enabling a gendered analysis of how power relations determine as well as are co-determined by change processes at scale (Shrestha et al. 2019). As discussed in the articles in this special issue, the practice of commoning needs to be analysed through the intersectional lens in order to understand how practices of oppression operate, as well as how practices of mutual support and negotiation can create systems of well-being and fair socio-natural relations (Leder et al. 2019; Rap and Jaskolski 2019).

## 2. Scales and spaces

A multiscale approach has become fundamental to both commons studies (Armitage 2008) and FPE (Elmhirst 2011). Understanding how the local and the global as well as humans and environment are interrelated is thought to be necessary for developing a framework to examine issues that are pressing, such as climate, economic and environmental changes. FPE highlights how these interrelationships operate within intersecting webs of gender and other power relations in often invisible everyday spaces. FPE analyses the interdependencies among bodies, households, communities, organisations, ecologies, political and economic processes. It recognises that gender and other forms of social difference are relational and dynamic and that these gendered differences shape the changing meanings of politics, environment, self and nonhuman others across scales and spaces.

Historically, FPE studies have examined how social relationships within everyday spaces, such as households and communities, mutually influence access to resources, identities and knowledge by paying special attention to intersectionality (Rocheleau et al. 1996 – see also in this issue Leder et al. 2019; Rap and Jaskolski 2019). An earlier study (Zwarteveen and Meinzen-Dick 2001), through a review of management of irrigation systems in South Asia, identified the importance of

intra-households relationships to understanding gendered struggles over access to and control over water common resources and decision-making. Western feminist theory has stressed that gender is more than just a discursive construct lacking materiality, contributing to theorise a relationship between gender and the material body (e.g. Butler 1993; Grosz 1994). Inspired by these insights, FPE scholars have defended since the late 1990s, a greater attention to embodied subjectivities (e.g. Jackson 1998) and an acknowledgement that the body is an intimate site of struggles (e.g. Harcourt 2009; Langston 2010). Jackson (1998) argues that the bodily experience of work affects well-being and intra-household negotiations on labour division. Sultana (2009) also stresses the bodily dimension of human relations to water in her study of arsenic contamination in groundwater in Bangladesh. Lastly, Nightingale (2011) challenges the dominant understanding that cooperation within common property debates is ‘rational’ by showing how emotions expressed through bodies of Scottish fishermen in multiple spaces, from the boats and the community to the meeting room with policy makers, shape diverse and complex cooperation modes. Three contributions to this special issue (Harcourt 2019; Leder et al. 2019; Nightingale 2019) explore this line of research further.

Along with increased attention to the body as an important dimension within multiscale FPE analyses, the connection of gender and the body to ecological, macroeconomic neoliberal policies, alternatives to development and postcapitalism is also a major theme in FPE (Elmhirst and Resurrección 2008). The centrality of an interest in postdevelopment and postcapitalism points to the intersection of the scholarship of FPE and feminist political economy. Some FPE scholars<sup>1</sup> have integrated the postcapitalist politics articulated by Gibson-Graham (2006), but there is still a lack of strong class analysis within FPE where scholars do not often examine class processes when analyzing neoliberal political economy or only highlight capitalist class processes and fail to see viable non-capitalist processes in the economy (Bauhardt and Harcourt 2019). FPE still needs to learn how to read the economy for difference in order to open up possibilities for more just futures through commoning practices can be imagined (Sato and Soto Alarcón 2019).

FPE scholarship that intersects with the study of the commons has thus far tended to look at the commons as an object of analysis and focus on its biophysical elements, such as natural common resource and property in everyday interconnected spaces of the body, the households and the community. Two notable emerging lines push FPE’s multiscale and multispace approaches further.<sup>2</sup> One line of investigation draws on non-dualistic concepts, such as *naturcultures* (Haraway 2008) or *socionature* (Braun 2002; Nightingale 2019), new materialism and material feminism (see Elmhirst 2015), and queer ecologies

<sup>1</sup> See Bauhardt and Harcourt (2019). Also Harcourt (2019), Nightingale (2019), and Sato and Soto Alarcón (2019).

<sup>2</sup> While it is not discussed in this issue, another addition, influenced by larger political ecology debates, is the incorporation of geological time scales, such as the Anthropocene (Di Chiro 2017; Nightingale 2018).



(Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010) along with other posthumanist theories (see examples of multispecies commoning by Sato and Soto Alarcón 2019). Another line explores commons types beyond the biophysical. Three contributions in this issue (Harcourt 2019; Sato and Soto Alarcón 2019; Tummers and MacGregor 2019) illuminate links between biophysical and non-biophysical commons. Harcourt and Tummers and MacGregor articulate spaces, higher education classroom and co-housing respectively, as a potential site for commoning. Sato and Soto Alarcón call for a better understanding of diverse types of commons other than biophysical (i.e. knowledge, cultural, social) in how a community is produced.

Crucial to these existing and emerging FPE approaches is understanding of interdependencies between economic, social, political and environmental processes across multiple scales in multiple spaces, with a focus on everyday practices. By making visible how such processes are fluid and intersecting across scales in multiple spaces, FPE challenges the master's tools (Lorde 1984) finding that they constrain us to think in terms of binaries and silos of knowledge where social, political, economic and cultural processes are studied in isolation. In this approach, FPE allows a more complex understanding of how power perpetuates inequality, making visible existing oppressions. Further, it also allows identifying new possibilities as we imagine the potential of commoning in transformative practices, while at the same time, recognising, as Nightingale (2019) and Tummers and MacGregor (2019) remind us, contingent and ambivalent outcomes.

### 3. Transformative forms of collective action

Collective action has been a central object of enquiry for both FPE and commons studies. A comparison of the analytical lenses on collective action between these two bodies of knowledge illustrates different policy and development agendas, concerns and objects of scientific enquiry as well as potential for fruitful synergies.

Early commons studies have explored the ability of communities to collectively manage natural resources in a sustainable manner (see seminal works from Ostrom 1990; Wade 1994; Baland and Platteau 1996). An underlying concern of mainstream commons scholarship has been to solve environmental scarcity problems, limit environmental degradation and preserve natural resources, to support local livelihoods. Collective action has largely been depicted as initiated by local communities, who purposively design rules to manage their resources, a stance criticised for its lack of attention to power relationships and ad-hoc forms of 'institutional bricolage' (Mosse 1997; Agrawal 2003; Cleaver and de Koning 2015).

Aside from concerns over environmental degradation, there has been an increasing number of ecological distribution conflicts and resistance. Environmental justice movements started in the 1970s in the USA, whereby poorer populations organised themselves to protest against the unequal distribution of environmental pollution (Schlosberg 2004). At the same time, social movements and political



activism in the Global South emerged against the commodification, enclosure or overexploitation of natural commons (McAfee and Shapiro 2010; Kirwan et al. 2015). In this case, citizens have led collective action to defend their existing entitlements or to make new claims.

Such conflicts and movements of resistance have often been related to or overlap with social conflicts related to gender or other social differences (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016). FPE scholars have been interested in forms of collective action animated by social justice concerns and documented how conflicts intersect with processes of empowerment (Veuthey and Gerber 2010), for instance how subjectivities such as ‘women’, ‘indigenous groups’ or ‘forest-users’ affect who participates in and influences collective action in commons management (Nightingale and Ojha 2013) and whose views and interests do they represent. Recent studies show that understanding gendered subjectivities is key to understanding why men and women participate in different types of environmental movements and engage in forms of resistance through everyday practices. For instance, women might draw on their identity of “mothers” to guide their consumption choices (Hawkins 2012) or to justify their activism in environmental justice movements as menstrual activists (Gaybor 2019) or where children’s health is central to their claims (Bell and Braun 2010).

#### 4. Fruitful synergies and tensions between FPE and commons studies

This special issue aims to initiate a dialogue between commons studies and FPE through papers that examine socionature transformations (see Nightingale 2019) and, how these transformations, when viewed through a feminist intersectional lens, can expose issues of inequality, power and privilege. It is, above all, concerned about new understandings of how humans connect and interact with the environment in the context of growing disparities and injustices as well as pressures on natural capital that can support deliberative, emotional and transformative approaches to commons studies and commoning practices. The articles offer examples of fruitful synergies between different strands of commons studies and FPE while also highlighting potential tensions.

Drawing on critical property studies, the notion of diverse economies found in the postcapitalist politics discussed above, feminist theory and commoning literatures, Nightingale (ibid) politicises the production of communities through commoning. In her examination of commoning as performed by community forestry users in Nepal, she illuminates how humans emerge as subjects of commoning within socionatural and emotional relations. Her analysis critically reminds us of commoning as boundary making, as a process of inclusion and exclusion, embedded in the exercises of power whose outcomes are always contingent and ambivalent.

Addressing the need to look at political economy issues, Sato and Soto Alarcón (2019) examine how scholars of existing feminism, Marxism and postcapital-

ist community economies contribute to the study of the commons and commoning. Integrating insights from these fields, they present a 'postcapitalist feminist political ecology' perspective with a case study of a cooperative producing agave syrup in rural Mexico. Their analysis and study illustrates how multispecies commoning-community can be part of diverse commoning practices which, when attention is paid to gender inequalities, can be part of transformative politics.

In their article on co-housing projects in Europe, Tummers and MacGregor (2019) show how an FPE perspective can support commoning projects and research on commons to move 'beyond wishful thinking'. Their findings shed light on otherwise silenced issues related to care, ecological and social justice. They conclude that whereas co-housing projects change the social reproduction spaces where people share time and resources, they will fail to achieve social justice unless patriarchal-capitalist structures are challenged through radical cultural change.

Rap and Jaskolski (2019) examine how gender, intersected by class, ethnicity, caste, and other categories, affect collective action and access to land, water and ecosystem services. In their study of a land reclamation project in Egypt, they explore how intersectional subjectivities lend to different commoning strategies and shape differential access to land, water and other natural resources. They use three cases of women to illustrate how place, gender, class and culture intersect to affect how these women develop gendered subject positions and negotiate access to resources.

Leder et al. (2019) analyse an action research project in the Eastern Gangetic plains (India and Nepal) that piloted farming collectives. They assess whether and how the new commoning practices that emerged from these collectives enabled marginalised and landless groups to practice and gain from agriculture. The findings clearly stress three factors affecting the process of farming collectively: first, the intersection of gender and class shape collective farming roles, responsibilities as well as gains and burdens. Second, social and environmental relations at scales, within the household and among households within the collectives, and beyond, impact collective dynamics. A third issue, emotional attachment—of particular communities with nature, as well as amongst themselves is equally important, allowing in some cases collective decisions among the marginalised with a view to balance short term risks, challenges and uncertainties with long term visions of a social and economic collective. Through these analyses, the paper critically unpacks long-held assumptions of collectives and the commons.

Shrestha et al. (2019) explore gender power relations in the context of global commons management. They apply a FPE lens to examine how hierarchies and gender inequalities are produced through performances of masculinity in two hydropower development organisations in India. They question the effectiveness of relying on gender equality toolkits in hegemonic masculine cultures—as these shape organisational practices to the extent that acknowledging vulnerabilities, inequalities and disparities is not possible. Key to their analysis is an openness about the sensitivities such research requires, as the (female) researchers them-

selves are positioned by the same gender hierarchies. They argue that gender inequalities can only be addressed through a scrutiny of the dominant masculine organisational culture and societal values.

Being nurtured by ongoing dialogues between postdevelopment, community economies and FPE, Harcourt (2019) conceptualises a higher education international classroom in the Global North as a site for commoning. She conceives this commoning, called ‘worlding’, as contributing to the creation of interconnected worlds, involving different temporalities, more-than-human, material and spiritual worlds. Sharing her own experiences of using drawing and art making to discuss often silenced emotions and hopes concerning the social, political, economic and environmental crisis, she enables us to imagine alternative ways in which we might be able to forge a community that supports a broader feminist, ecological justice project in our respective locations.

A final more personal word about why we embarked on writing this special issue together. As activist and engaged scholars, we have been involved in research around feminist political ecology, post capitalism, commoning and critical development in different institutions and different locations. We first came together in what was possibly the first panel on FPE at the 2017 International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) conference in Utrecht. As the editorial reflects, we, and the writers, come to FPE from these different experiences and disciplines. We have deliberately not smoothed away the diverse FPE approaches that the different texts take to the study of the commons and commoning. It is important to encourage diverse responses to the major issues of our times that these articles address in order to generate critical discussions. We feel that by cultivating our diversities, we allow for deeper connections and collaborations around commoning as part of a much-needed politics of hope.

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