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Gleaning on the Shores of Politics. Commoning as the New Philosophy of *Praxis*

The article joins the recent discussion, led by theorists of the commons, on the meaning of “commoning”. It proposes to recognize as the main feature of the practice of commoning the capacity to reproduce the autonomy of plebeian life-worlds that could possibly lead to a post-capitalist future. The identification of commoning as the activity of marginal subjectivities is presented here with the example of gleaning. This traditional activity of the poor is re-examined in the article as an ambiguous practice that escapes the binaries of activity and passivity, positivity and negativity, production and reproduction. Gleaning, with its reproductive capacities, serves as a model for commoning, understood as the new philosophy of *praxis*, which is much needed in the times of ecological catastrophe and the broken connection between labour and care. The history of struggles around gleaning and the commons, and the figures of the poor female harvester (*glaneuse*) and urban ragpicker (*chiffonnier*) are recalled in the article in order to recognize the much devaluated potential of commoning to interrupt the history of blind productivism and, together with reclaiming the commons, to also reclaim our future.

Keywords: commoning, gleaning, *praxis*, the commons, the rabble

The term “commoning”, once strange and obscure, in recent years appeared in many notable writings on the commons (Baldauf et al. 2016; Bollier and Helfreich 2015; Bollier 2016; Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Choi and Pai 2017; Esteva 2014; Federici 2014; Gibson-Graham et al. 2018; Kalb and Mollona 2018; Ruivenkamp and Hilton 2017). We may say that it has become part of the common sense of the new social theory of the commons, which Ugo Mattei and Mark Mancall (2019) gave the label “communology”. But it seems that its recent spread came at a cost. Seeing commoning “in modern urban skyscrapers as well as in remote rural villages destroyed by earthquakes in Nepal; in artistic communities and educational and research settings; and in the community forests of India and the many self-organized communities of cyberspace” (Bollier and Helfreich 2015), may lead to the banalization and the loss of meaning of the notion.

Here I would like to re-establish the connection between commoning and the common people (or commoners). Following Peter Linebaugh, the proponent of the verb “commoning”, I argue that it is the capacity to reproduce the autonomy of plebeian life-worlds that constitute the essential feature of the practice of commoning. In what follows I wish to examine its character by concentrating on one form of commoning, which I selected because it re-appears time and time again in the historic discourse on the commons. I have in mind the customary right to gleaning, or the collecting aftermath after the harvest. As demonstrated further, the right to glean was historically acknowledged as the traditional right of the poor, especially needy women and widows.

I would like to specify – with the example on gleaning – the status of commoning. Is it just the collective way of managing resources? Or could we find in commoning also the political dimension of constituting common bonds in a novel way? My approach aims to establish both the economic and political roles of commoning. I argue that in commoning it is possible to uncover a plebeian alternative, in order to constitute political communality from the margins of society. Grasping this alternative is possible only if we examine commoning not just as a way to defend, reproduce and govern the commons, but also as a political practice. The proposed examination therefore belongs to the realm of the philosophy of *praxis*, with the reservation that here the notion of *praxis* as such will also come under *praxis*, or “theoretical practice” (Althusser, Balibar 1970, 41-43). As a result, the subject behind this practice would no longer be proletarian, understood as the living source of economic value, a bearer of labour-power to sell, or a collective sub-

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ject responsible for applying science to materialist history. The proletariat would be replaced by the commoner, whose common sense with regard to the ecology of the commons and their embodied, habitual knowledge on cooperation and commoning should lead to stopping history before it reaches its final conclusion in ecological catastrophe. The guardians of the commons and their ability to common (a verb) are instrumental for emancipating the dialectics of capitalist history from its fulfilment and for opening the different horizons of the future.

The revolt of verbs against nouns: commoning as the *praxis* of powerlessness

Many theorists of the commons proposed, in one way or another, to highlight the activity of commoners as a crucial feature of their discourses. The commons should not be regarded mainly as a resource for maintaining the already-established right to defend, or as an idea to pursue, but as a form of practice. In short, it is not *a thing* to hold or even to make, but work to do. But this work is peculiar. It is not subjugated to making things, as a mean to an end. It is rather work to endure, to reproduce itself, to open collective possibilities for others to join. Its only destiny is to care for the commoners – “to common” or “to communize”.

There are two basic reasons behind these proposals to start thinking about the commons from a processual level. The first, nicely captured by Linebaugh and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval respectively, is the danger of the reification of the commons in the form of an external resource or system for the reproduction of goods. The second, grasped most completely by John Holloway, is the tendency to see the commons as some sort of solution ready for simple implementation. In both cases, the practice of constituting and sustaining the commons is seen as subordinate and instrumental to higher and external purposes or principles. This risk may be avoided, according to the aforementioned authors, if the activity of constituting the commons is rethought and liberated from top-down constraints.

Linebaugh is clear in explaining that his introduction of the term “commoning” designated for him the need to grasp the autonomy of the plebeian classes and the whole life-world of bottom-up practices, which opposed the enclosures of the commons and formed a basis for seeking alternatives to capitalism:

To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst – the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb than a noun, a substantive (Linebaugh 2008, 279).

Linebaugh frequently observed that one of the strategies of enclosing and destroying the commons consists in denying their existence or – at best – seeing them only as an external resource, which reproduces itself independently from human practice. The commons stood in contradiction to the property regime and that's why – leaving economic reasons beside – they had to be annihilated. Without acknowledging different modes of commoning, the commons tended to be reified and regarded as a no man's land, ready for appropriation. They are not easy to notice, because their character is often marginal, hidden, informal, local and habitual. As Linebaugh (2008, 44-45) specifies, there are four main principles of commoning: 1) it is embedded in the local ecology of the commons; 2) it is embedded in the labour process, and the right to commoning is gained through collective work, it inheres in a particular praxis of a field, an upland, a forest, a marsh and so on; 3) it is a collective activity; 4) it is independent from the state and the law, it was recorded in the customs and habits of the everyday life of ordinary people. Linebaugh underlines the reproductive capacities of commoning not only in the relation to the sustainable managing of resources, but also to maintaining collective subsistence and solidarity: “the allure of commoning arises from the mutualism of shared resources. Everything is used, nothing is wasted. Reciprocity, sense of self, willingness to argue, long memory, collective celebration, and mutual aid are traits of the commoner” (2008, 103).

Dardot and Laval are even more determined to escape the charge that commoning cannot expand to new areas. According to these authors, what prevails in Linebaugh's approach is treating the commons as some lost paradise, which can be only recreated. When we conceptualize the commons as a state of equilibrium, then commoners are the guardians of the past and commoning is a practice of the reproduction of the same. Dardot and Laval are interested in a more expansive and generative kind of activity – of producing and not only defending the commons. “Common” for them is also a verb, not a noun, but it is clearly related to an offensive form of politics:

We must, therefore, recognize that the common as custom was always an activity that produced and confirmed the law, and that its conflictual character was

not contingent but *constitutive*. Instead of trying to establish an erroneous parallel between the commons of yesteryear and the commons of today, based on the positive characteristics of their respective contents, we must rather fully recognize the antagonistic dimension of the commons in our present situation: *the common is never simply a matter of “managing” a “good” or a “resource,” but is grounded in an activity that constructs the common in and through conflict*. This is why we prefer the word “common” as a verb rather than a noun, or, if it cannot be avoided, to make the noun denote a *sui generis* form of activity (Dardot and Laval 2019, 217).

Leaving aside the differences between the authors, their shared concern is to reject the critique that the potential of developing the commons is limited either by natural restraints on the part of the common resource, or by the burden of tradition, habits and customs. They both oppose the tendency of the reification of the commons – in their natural or legal form. The reification is challenged by the emphasis put on the *praxis* of commoning.

The second danger that leads to the closure of commoning comes not from the past, but from the future. It is the danger of *praxis* that is subordinated to realizing the anticipated goals. Here the power of commoning becomes restricted by the foreseeable state. In Holloway’s opinion, historical projects of building communism could be interpreted as totalizing attempts to utilize and steer human practice in order to realize the course of history. The noun – communism – starts to smother verbs – different forms of communizing. That’s why the author of *Change the World Without Taking Power* postulates “the revolt of verbs against nouns” (Holloway 2014, 213). The kind of *praxis* that Holloway pursues has to be antagonistic to any closed conception of history. But his theoretical proposition is opposed not only to a dogmatic, static and linear vision of progress, but also to dialectical approach in which *praxis* itself is open to its modifications because of encountered contradictions. The activities under Holloway’s consideration never fully exhaust themselves. They rather pause the dialectics instead of propelling or transforming it:

It has to be a verb, doesn’t it? A noun cannot possibly express adequately the sort of society we want. A social organizing that is self-determining cannot possibly be contained inside a noun. The notion of communism is grossly, nonsensically, dangerously self-contradictory. A noun suggests some form of fixity that would be incompatible with a collective self-creating. A noun excludes the active subject, whereas the whole point of the world we want is that the active social subject would be at the center. Ours is the revolt of verbs against

nouns. It is the revolt of being-able-to against Power, of poder against Poder, pouvoir against Pouvoir, potere against Potere, machen (and können) against Macht. The moving of self-determining (of communizing) against alien determination can hardly be otherwise (Holloway 2014, 213).

Further on in the text he proposes replacing the noun “communism” with the verb “to communize” in order to make clear that he is interested in questioning every totalizing form of identity by liberating practices and indeterminations:

The noun is closely tied to the closure of identity, whereas a verb suggests non-identity, an overflowing of identity, a bursting-beyond, a moving of anti-identity, an anti-identifying that can be understood only as a constant moving against the identity within which it is (and we are) entrapped, a subverting. (...) Communizing is the moving against that which stands in the way of our social determination of our own lives (Holloway 2014, 214).

Of course, as Holloway admits in the conclusion, anti-identitarian practice could occur only in plural forms – not as a communizing, but as many communizings (Holloway 2014, 220). His thinking thus heads in the same direction as Linebaugh’s emphasis on the necessity of seeing various forms of commoning, which are dependent on multiple ecologies of the commons and the pluralist habits to which plebeian classes are accustomed. The same conclusion was reached in the realm of feminist social reproduction theory, with its emphasis on the necessity of reorganization of reproductive work (Federici 2012, 147-148), or in the indigenous philosophies which promote biodiversity, sustainability and the access to knowledge and other means of reproduction (Shiva 2020). Relational and socially rooted forms of co-belonging are once again being valued as fruitful responses to the crisis of the reproduction of common life.

After this recapitulation of the motives behind the proposals to re-model the theory of the commons by beginning with practice, we see that what animates them is the double concern of the underestimation and overestimation of commoning. Underestimation refers to the risk of ignoring the practices of commoners as unimportant, marginal and passive – without the potential to expand and go beyond capitalism. Overestimation denotes the symmetric danger of celebrating the “building of communism” and privileging transformative labour that would bring to life the structures of its own enslavement. Commoning, as a verb that refuses to reach the state of fulfilment, that rather stops at the stage

of doing without “being done”, appears to be the ambiguous *praxis/non-praxis* or the practice of powerlessness.

In what follows I would like to examine this interesting feature of commoning a little closer by turning to a traditional, even stereotypical example: the gleaning of leftovers, traditionally associated with the figure of the poor and needy female. As this conventional example shows, the nature of commoning is trapped in between the aporetic tension between activity and passivity, resistance and submission, productivity and reproducibility. I claim that the key to liberating commoning as the plebeian power (Linares 2014) of autonomy from capital, and as a basis for post-capitalist politics, lies in the re-conceptualizing of these dichotomies in a novel way.

The instinct of the poor: Karl Marx and the gleaners

It is justified to regard commoning in general and gleaning in particular as practices of powerlessness, because in history they were treated as the ancient right of the paupers. Both the marginal subjectivities and the communal resources which were customarily ascribed to the poor and the destitute are relegated to the outskirts of society. Commoning is traditionally located outside property relations, beyond the law and in opposition to the sphere of production – under the forms of possession, habit and reproductive *usus* (Agamben 2013). The role of commoners in turn is played down as an idle and unproductive part of society, maybe even the waste, “the part of no part” (Rancière 2010) or is associated with the subalterns without the right to speak or the ability to represent themselves, or to be represented by something else (Spivak 1988).

Together with Michał Pospiszyl (Moll, Pospiszyl 2019a; 2019b) we have proposed studying the margins of community as the sites of various manifestations of commoning, and to search in the disdained lower classes for the forgotten or erased figures of commoners. Our approach was driven by the desire to avoid a double risk, which is widely encountered in the history of the philosophy of the marginal subjects. This double risk is directly related to the already mentioned tension in treating commoning as *praxis*: the tension between positivity and negativity, activity and passivity, the identity of stable nouns and the non-identity of processual verbs. I claim that the case of gleaning is exemplary for grasping the kind of practice that resists the temptation to appropriate, and promotes the bonds of sharing and mutuality. In order to demonstrate how difficult it is to conceptualize the gleaners and other figures

of commoners, and to avoid the simplified binary of activity and passivity, it is worth recapitulating Karl Marx's attempts to delineate the meaning of the proletariat.

The first documented encounter of Marx with proletarians and proletarianization (i.e. the loss of direct sources of subsistence by labourers and their transformation into the free labour-power) – is directly connected with the activity of gleaners (Linebaugh 2014, 43-64). Interestingly, this episode was recently recalled in the biographic motion picture *The Young Karl Marx*, directed by Raoul Peck: in the first part of the film, rural gatherers in a Westphalian forest are attacked by the police, who are positioned to protect the private property from commoners. The first texts he ever wrote for publication – in *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842 – Marx (1842, 224-263) was devoted to the issue of the theft of wood and the new law reform which criminalized the poor, who were accustomed to collecting dead wood and using it as a source of heating or for minor construction works. The motive behind the reform was the landowners' greedy attempt to commodify dead and fallen wood. In order to do so it was necessary to take away from the commoners their permit to usufruct. Dead wood had to be treated in the same way as "living" wood, and its collection – as mere theft. Many years later, in one of his letters – from 1859 (Löwy 2005, 25) – Marx admitted that this case of delegitimation of commoning practices helped him to realize his ignorance in economic matters (Foster 2000, 66). In trying to defend the poor's access to dead wood, Marx was already aware that analogous customary laws had been lost in relation to gathering wild berries and gleaning (Marx 1842, 234). His rhetorical strategy to protest against the enclosures of the commons in Westphalian forests was twofold – as analysed in detail by Dardot and Laval (2019, 219-247). It is worth mentioning here because it contains the already discussed tensions between the negative and positive character of gathering waste.

On the one hand, Marx regarded the poor in purely negative terms: for him the structural role of paupers in the society was the same as the relation between dead wood and the forest. Both paupers and dead wood are nothing more than waste, a remnant or a margin of the system. Dead wood is formed in a spontaneous and contingent way – it is not a product of the human labour and has nothing to do with private property. In the same manner the poor are a necessary by-product of the society: "class (...) which has the same position in civil society as these objects have in nature" (Marx 1842, 233). Here Marx followed in Hegel's footsteps: the poor are synonymous with the Hegelian *Pöbel* – the rabble – forming itself as waste of industrial, capitalist society. The collective

property which the poor wanted to maintain was for Marx only the residue of pre-historical times – the commons were destined to perish with the advent of the class society and private property. It is this pre-historical human nature – stripped not only of wealth but of basic sources of subsistence – that manifests itself in the practices of the theft of wood. For Marx the poor cling to dead wood in a natural and instinctive mode of behaviour: “fallen (...) wood has as little organic connection with the growing tree as the cast-off skin has with the snake. (...) Human poverty senses this kinship and deduces the right to property from this feeling of kinship” (Marx 1842, 234). On the other hand, even if the relation of paupers to dead wood is pre-historical, natural, unconscious or habitual, Marx argued that their customary law should be defended and no violation of it should be allowed, without some satisfaction in the form of new benefits. The act of the enclosure of forests and the privatization of dead and fallen wood symbolized the partiality and arbitrariness of the law, which serves the needs of the propertied classes, who are inclined to own more than they are entitled to. They are even ready to violate nature to appropriate what results from the metabolic process and belongs to the oldest customs, being apart from the productive activity of the forest’s owner. The written law fails to be universal not only because dominant classes try to use it for their particular interests. Marx also noted another reason for its false universality. The law is partial and particular because the poor are not included in it on equal terms. That means that as far as the privileges of those already privileged by law are simply unjustifiable, thus the benefits of the underprivileged are perfectly deserved by them, because there are the benefits of the excluded. Customary right is by its very nature “the right of this lowest, propertyless and elemental mass” (Marx 1842: 230). Those at the margins of society should have at least additional protection by customs – remnants of the past and remnants of living nature.

What is important for our purposes is the fact that despite his negative conception of the poor – as anomic, idle, stripped from wealth, being little more than the “dead wood” of society – Marx finds also the second argument for their defence. It is symmetrically opposite to the first one – the poor have the right to the commons, because of their activities as commoners: “it is by its activity, too, that poverty acquires its right. By its act of gathering, the elemental class of human society appoints itself to introduce order among the elemental power of nature” (Marx 1842, 234). Here Marx even directly noted, that in the practices of commoning – such as gleaning – the poor rise to the level of subjectivity. Marx regarded gleaning as collective *praxis*, as elementary effort

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to arrange and rationalize nature. He wrote that in gleaning the poor reveal an instinctive sense of law which waits for satisfaction in the form of a new model of society – the customary right of poverty functions as an anticipation of the truly universal law.

Thus the poor, in the articles on the theft of wood, also appear as a class with some labour and productive potential. One should be careful, however, not to miss the specificity of their activity. It would be easy to conclude that through these acts of exercising their rights commoners simply appropriate dead wood, wild berries or leftovers. If we accept this line of thinking, the possibility to reproduce the commons is lost – the commoners become appropriators or petty-capitalists. That's where, again, it is crucial to recognize, like Dardot and Laval (2019, 241-243), the peculiar vision of activity that Marx had in mind when he presented his second argument to give commoners support. According to Dardot and Laval, Marx alluded to Fichte's conception of free activity, in which the right to property lies not in the object, but in the act of work. That means that, in this case, there is no right to own a resource. The practice of commoning leads not to accumulation, but defends the common right to use. In effect, appropriation is never final, exclusive and exhaustive – it should remain temporary, open for others and reproductive (Bensaïd 2010, 43-49). In this way it is possible to develop – through commoning – the idea of possession and use, instead of property and the enclosure of the commons. It has to be a verb, doesn't it?

The first justification of the right of the poor rested on a negative or destitute collective subject – the Hegelian rabble which Marx tried to re-cast as the universal class by pointing out that it stands out as “an estate which represents the dissolution of all estates” (Marx 1843, 186). The second argumentation – composed around the notion of free activity, of positivity which rejects itself and defends against appropriation – could be foundational for communist philosophy of *praxis* that I seek. Sadly, this idea was not further developed, remaining only a kind of a glimpse in Marx's oeuvre. It was replaced by the third proposition which became dominant in Marxian legacy: that of the industrial proletariat, equipped with a transforming kind of *praxis* that should lead to the socialization of property, not to the dissolution of property into the commons. The trace of self-restraining labour was nowhere to be found in the progressive narration on the historical stages of development, in which the productive *praxis* of the proletariat was seen in its destined movement towards communism. From that point of view, the commons were nothing more than the residues of primitive communism and customs of the poor, which functioned rather as the obstacle to

progress than as its condition of possibility (Dardot and Laval 2019, 245-247).

The choice – both philosophical and political – of Marx to free the proletariat from connotations with passivity, idleness and dirt – and to equip it with positive qualities to bring about progress – resulted, in the long run, in privileging factory workers. Marx embraced all the activities and qualities which went along with a vision of the proletariat as a human demiurge, ready to initiate the new epoch of history. From that point of view, the practices of commoning – such as gleaning – have been looked down upon, as a non-productive or only reproductive labour. The importance of reproductive women's labour, of communal forms of property and cooperation, of pre-capitalist traditions of resistance and self-organization, of non-Western and non-Enlightenment modes of knowledge or of crucial value of sustainability of eco-systems was downgraded in Marxism for decades.

Elsewhere I argued that late in his life Marx undertook “the communal turn” in which he was much more sympathetic and reliant towards commoning (Moll 2019). He suddenly abandons the hierarchy, or even the very division between the labouring proletariat and the parasitical *lumpen* (Bussard 1987). We remember Marx's distrust towards the latter – easily corrupted and prone to ally with bigger classes, and historically reactionary forces. The only determinations of the lumpenproletariat were related to criminality, illegality, theft, vagrancy or prostitution. On the other side of class society Marx saw the same parasitical inclinations in the lifestyles of the elites, which he frequently called the luxury *Lumpens* (Ruda 2011; Sakai 2017). In the case of the lumpenproletariat, the earlier connection to the autonomous practices of commoning, heavily present in Marx's vision of the poor, was abandoned.

Here I would like to come back to the much more ambiguous framing of gleaning from the early articles on the theft of wood and to examine this binary opposition between negativity and positivity once again. To do so I have to problematize the alternative of production and reproduction – today in the times of the global ecological crisis and the mobilization of movements for recognizing the crucial role of reproductive labour for future well-being. What is to be sought here, therefore, could be perhaps called a more fortunate balance between production and reproduction. As I would like to show, the inspiration for accomplishing this may be found in plebeian practices, which remain close to the intermediate and marginal collective subject in Marx, the one that stands between the idle paupers and the industrious proletariat – namely, the commoners.

Gleaning on the outskirts of society

We know from historians of the poor about the vital role the commons played not only for material subsistence, but also for the reproduction of the autonomous life-worlds of lower classes. For Steven King and Alannah Tomkins, one of the strategies facilitating such autonomy is based on the “economy of makeshifts”, which “summarizes patchy, desperate and sometimes failing strategies of the poor for material survival”, based for example on “access to common land, mobilization of kinship support, resorting to crime, and other marginal resources” (King and Tomkins 2003, 1, 6). They estimate that in the case of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, gleaning constituted one of the most significant form of subsistence for poor households (King 2003, 240).

We know also from other historical accounts that gleaning indeed was regarded by the rural poor as an indispensable component of their survival, and as their customary right (King 1992). J.M. Neeson, historian of the enclosures of the English commons – i.e. the process crucial for the history of the primitive accumulation of capital – showed that gleaning was at stake in class struggles, and in the court disputes between the commoners and the nobles: “gleaning was a common practice, universally regard as the common right. Indefensible at common law after 1788, in most villages with some arable fields it survived and prospered none the less. (...) Gleaning persisted longer than any other right or custom” (Neeson 1996, 313-314). In fact this author of *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* confirms, through the use of historical sources, its spread even in the second half of nineteenth century, and Peter King relates the longevity and persistence of the practices of gleaning to the failure of legal sanctions against commoners (King 1989). The even longer duration of gleaning in the life-worlds of the plebeian classes was sketched out by Stephen Hussey (1997), whose research in Essex allowed him to state that gleaning continued there well into the twentieth century. The specific function of gleaning significantly changed over time, but the right to acquire the basic means of subsistence was held by the ordinary people. In the years between two World Wars the main motivation to glean ceased to be collecting wheat to have the flour for the household bread baking. The demand for bread was generally provided by bakeries, but the villagers started to glean for their animals. The experience of gleaning in the fields, and the working of specific rituals and customs, were also confirmed in the recollections expressed in the oral testimonies cited by Hussey. The sources indicate that gleaning fell out of wider use in the

1950s. At the same time they confirm that it was capable of metamorphoses under new methods of production and new patterns of living.

That's why it is not surprising that historians of the lower classes managed to discover the converted forms of gleaning not only in rural economies, but also in urban ones in the wake of the industrial revolution. According to Linebaugh (2003) a powerful example of urban proletarian habit of gleaning can be found in the most advanced – in technical terms – enterprises of the late eighteenth-century. In the heart of the maritime empire, such as one of the ports by the river Thames, collection of chips (wood scraps and waste) and the practice of looting goods on a huge scale were two activities that gave the elites a shipload of worries.

In *The London Hanged*, Linebaugh showed that the amount of wood looted in the form of chips from shipyards and commercial goods (especially sugar) stolen from port warehouses was unprecedented. The level of “waste” was harming the economic profitability and organizational order, but for the urban plebs (not only workers, but also porters, itinerant sellers, coopers, chimney sweeps, servants, mule pokers, rat-catchers and wives and children of the proletariat), access to the products of their labour was a fair custom. The struggle to maintain the rights to the commons in urban, industrializing surroundings was as tough as in the villages. What's more, the right to chips was regarded as legitimate both by capitalists and by judges, who had the task of normalizing this practice in law. At stake was not the right to chips itself, but rather the specific modes of its application: the amount of material for plebeians, the forms and periods of its collecting, the subjectivities with legal access, or even the permitted ways of taking the goods out and the admissible dress-code. When entrance was forbidden, the plebeians used direct methods of pressure to get their portion of chips.

Thus the practice of gleaning and the struggle to retain it reappeared in a new context. The counter-offensive taken by the dominant classes was analogous to that undertaken in the countryside: the enclosure of the commons and the eradication of commoning. Ideas used by the reformers dated back to the famous Bentham brothers. The authors of different types of panopticons in their conceptions were of the opinion that the insubordination of the working class had to be halted. The autonomy of plebeian life-worlds constituted a danger for the development of the modern organization of work. We know that Samuel Bentham personally followed shipyard workers after their shift in order to find out why they wanted to have chips and why they preferred it to wages in money (Nahirny 2018, 159-161). He learned that besides

a preference for informal and private ways to sell or exchange woods in plebeian surroundings, the workers were interested in using the material to construct their environment, to build and renovate houses or to make furniture. The autonomy of plebeian form of life, protected by direct access to the means of subsistence, was crushed by a mix of technological, organizational and infrastructural changes, inspired by policing techniques of Jeremy and Samuel Bentham. Linebaugh showed that the enclosure was accomplished through the establishment of “wage slavery” (payments in cash), the appointment of police, the improvement of inspection at the entry to shipyards and ports, the introduction of norms of productivity, the uniformization of production processes, the standardization of working day, the mechanization of work, the hierarchization of workforce, replacing wood with metal, the erection of walls around docks, guarding the dress-code, and fighting the informal economy (Linebaugh 2003; Nahirny 2018, 178-182). The programme of changes was intended to unlearn plebeians to rely on income in product and networks of solidarity from the bottom up. It also reinforced the division between workers and idlers, productive workers and the reproductive or non-productive lumpenproletariat.

The proletarianization of the urban plebeians was thus possible with the annulation of the right to chips and the material conditions of commoners’ autonomy. The first typical forms of employment and organization of work in the history of capitalism were introduced as a response to plebeian self-organization and because of the fear of its power. In its heart was the reproductive capacity of the autonomous life-world of lower classes. Seen from this point of view the practice of gleaning seem to be much more than collecting waste, a side-effect of production of goods: it is *praxis* to constitute the margins of society on their own terms.

That’s why we shouldn’t be surprised that gleaning as a common right, from which Marx’s oeuvre starts, re-appears in his late correspondence. Engels wrote to Marx from Manchester on 10 November 1868 about his partner Lizzie Burns: “Lizzie was in Lincolnshire, visiting a patriarchal variety of agricultural labourers who do well – they have gardens and potato land, the right to gleaning, which brings in a lot and, in addition, passable wages” (Engels 1868, 156). Isn’t it symptomatic that “passable wages” are presented by Engels as an addition to “the right of gleaning”, which “brings a lot”, and not the other way around?

The proletarianization of the urban plebeians was thus possible with the annulation of the right to chips and the material conditions of commoners’ autonomy.

The gleaners and other flaneurs

But what remains of gleaning today? It seems that it will remain with us as long as there is something that remains. In the era of abundance for the few and scarcity for the many, gleaning is still alive, and it finds new uses in consumerist society. One of the most inspiring effort to re-conceptualize the nature of gleaning can be found not in the realm of social theory or history, but in film-making. Agnes Varda's documentary movie *The Gleaners and I* (2000) is an impressive undertaking in representing the margins – in multiple senses of the term – in such a way that their visibility is reached without reaching their essence, identity or permanent and stabilized position in society. The French female filmmaker skilfully oscillates between negative and political representations of the margins and creates new modes of representation of underrepresented or unrepresented subjectivities and activities. She is able to present both material waste – broken equipment, old furniture, discarded food and leftovers from harvests of grapes, tomatoes or potatoes – and “human” or “social” waste – gatherers in cities and in villages, tinkers, oysters fishermen, gypsies or proponents of freeganism, not only as the remnants of society, but also as fully-fledged life-worlds with their own characteristics. Gleaning is here this peculiar, even if hard to grasp, clandestine and shady, kind of *praxis*, which works on the reverse side of the system and helps to resurrect “dead” objects with commoners.

In fact, Varda suggests that these marginal subjectivities, items and practices around them are vital for the reproduction of society as a whole. In everyday life – and in the ideology of capitalism – they are hidden, underestimated and even stigmatized, as theorists of commoning such as Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis often stressed in their undertaking, to recognize the importance of reproductive sphere (Barbagallo, Beuret and Harvie 2019). But in Varda's empathic and sensitive lens, those who seem to be unproductive, idle or useless appear to be the guardians of reciprocal reproduction. In their practices we find social and ecological responsibility, the readiness to share social wealth equally, or the indignation felt with regard to excessive waste and other – human or non-human – costs of capitalism.

I refer to Varda's film not only because of its subject and the subtle and caring way in which she represented it. Her movie is an important point of reference for my own remarks also because the practice of gleaning is typically and traditionally ascribed to commoners as their ancient fate and right. Varda's ingenuity in showing the practice of gleaning beyond its literal meaning and original context enable her to

locate in it the social pattern of the reproduction of the common in its diversity. This is nowhere so clearly visible as in the closing scene of *The Gleaners and I*, in which Varda asks two female museum staff to bring from the archive the painting of gleaners who gather gleanings during a storm. The painting is taken outside the museum where another storm blows the clothes of Varda's collaborators just as in the picture. Gleaning starts to seem omnipresent. We've got rural gleaners gleaning in the field during a tempest, art-gleaners gleaning the painting from the archive also in windy conditions, and Varda recognizes herself as a gleaner-filmmaker – a gleaner who gleans images around herself. Finally, it is we, the viewers who are the gleaners – gleaners of Varda's patchwork montage and the multi-layered and unfinished meanings it creates.



Il. 1. Artistic gleaning of two gleaners carrying a picture of gleaners.
A still from the movie *Gleaners and I*.

Varda is successful in showing that gleaning is not limited to gathering waste in a field or next to trash containers. It is not some pre-historical or pre-capitalist activity. It is not limited to agriculture, to some specific products, trades or societal strata. Gleaning is the practice of reproduction, but it is never the reproduction of the same – it is always ready to find new meanings, new uses, new objects and new subjects. Varda – deliberately or not – exposes the point of similarity between the gleaner and the *flâneur* (Chrostowska 2007, 119). The resemblance between two terms is not only phonetic – it is also conceptual. As we know, the

figure of *flâneur* – the urban loungeur so important for Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin or Georg Simmel – provoked similarly divergent interpretations as the *glaneur* – or *glaneuse*. Some interpreters thought of the *flâneur* as an idler who simply squanders his time during metropolitan wanderings or falls prey to the capitalist consumerism. Others acknowledged the flaneur's ability to capture and transform reality. In the words of Baudelaire, quoted by Benjamin:

we might liken him to a mirror as vast as crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of the elements of life (Baudelaire 2010).

As subject of reproductive cognition, Varda herself is a *flâneur* who captures the gleaners. In the words of Nadia Bozak:

Transformed by the Varda's camera and the insight of her narration, the gleaners of the film function as analogs for Varda herself; indeed the process of employing images "gleaned" or harvested from the universe at large, scavenged and infused with new meaning once taken home, cleaned up, and edited, together confirms this equation (Bozak 2012, 164).

We may add to this observation that Varda's artistic practice blurs the difference between the excluded (demonized as "human trash") and the waste, the outskirts of society and the outskirts of nature, the city and the village, the flaneurs and the gleaners. The work of the idler un-works every division of work. This ambiguous practice remains a modern reminiscence of the "moral economy of the poor" (Thompson 1971), in which human needs and dignity were opposed to prodigality and excessive consumption of the wealthy and the privileged. Here Varda refrains from the problematic, even shocking portrayal of the dispossessed, known for instance from her *Vagabond* (1985). The main protagonist of this film, a female traveller who lives outside of society only to die from frostbite as a homeless person, turns out to be a purely destitute and passive subject. While Mona from *Vagabond* serves as the embodiment of the Marxian poor, almost animalistically seeking for survival and refuge, the characters from *The Gleaners and I* undertake a *praxis* of commoners without becoming proletarians – never leaving the margins, they know how to reproduce them and sketch them anew.

The characters from *The Gleaners and I* undertake a *praxis* of commoners without becoming proletarians – never leaving the margins, they know how to reproduce them and sketch them anew.

Woman is the gleaner of the world: the *passante* and the *chiffonier*

There is one more specificity that has to be commented on here: traditionally, and significantly, gleaner is rather a “she”, a *glaneuse*, more likely than a *glaneur*. The biblical Ruth, who was a widow and an orphan – but also a stranger, a foreigner (Moabite among the Jews) – receives the right to glean after the harvest, for herself and her mother-in-law, who is also widowed. In her afterlife, Ruth became the most famous gleaner in history and the symbol of the traditional right of the poor, especially destitute women, widows and orphans, to gain direct access to subsistence (Koosed 2011). Her case serves both religious authorities and the poor in legitimizing the right to the commons, in particular during harvests. There are also different passages in the Bible which helped to establish protection for commoners. The Book of Leviticus 19:9-10 mentions this very clearly: “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner”. The same commandment is repeated in Leviticus 23:22. The link between the entitlement to leftovers and the figures of the stranger, the orphan and the widow also appears in Deuteronomy 24:19-21: “When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow”.

What’s more, the right to glean is in no way restricted to the Judeo-Christian world. James C. Scott (1985), in his research on rural resistance and class conflict in Malaysian villages, recognized gleaning as one of the “weapons of the weak”, especially poor females. The right to glean is a part of the moral economy of the community, sanctioned by the Islamic principle of *Zakat* – the redistribution of the portion of wealth for the needy after the harvest.

In Europe the traditional right was supported by a biblical sanction. Chapter seven of the modified version of the *Magna Carta* (from 1517) proves a good example. It grants a widow, in the time of mourning after her late husband, the right to “have her reasonable estovers of the com-

mon” (Linebaugh 2008, 39). The much forgotten supplement to *Magna Carta, the Charter of the Forest* (1517) secured in turn broad access to the commons: “every freeman, in his wood or on his land that he has in the forest, may with impunity make a mill, fish-preserve, pond, marl-pit, ditch, or arable in cultivated land outside coverts, provided that no injury is thereby given to any neighbour”. Thus the story of Ruth and ancient rights of widows may be regarded as foundational in some way for contemporary eco-feminism, with its revaluation of reproductive female labour, embodied knowledge of nature and ethics of care (Federici 2015).

From the opposite point of view, it is claimed that the ancient right to glean is nothing more than a myth – one that was useful for the dominant classes. Researching the history of gleaning in France, Liana Vardi (1993) concluded that this myth was a novel invention, a by-product of the rise of the modern fiscal state. Contrary to the historians cited above, who treat gleaning as the customary law of the rural poor dating back to antiquity, Vardi claims that its origin is modern. In the Late Middle Ages, gleaning in France was nothing more than an integral part of the harvest. Regulations on its conduct were mainly practical and said nothing about the subjects entitled to glean. The situation changed in the sixteenth century, when the state – for fiscal purposes – deprived the holders of farms of the right to gleaning and saved it for the poor, old, infirmed and widowed. This could be done because the legislators perceived gleaning as a marginal activity, which generated no profit and thus couldn’t serve as an important source of taxation. In the eighteenth century, further warrants for the gleaning poor were introduced. These regulations were directed both against greedy landowners and illegal commoners. It was then that biblical arguments – mainly the story of Ruth – helped the state to legitimize a charitable vision of gleaning and the figure of the poor female gleaner. Indeed, the access to gleaning for the poor was then ensured, but often at the price of stigmatization or victimization of the very poor and the criminalization of other indigent commoners.

I am not competent to solve the dispute between Vardi and British historians (Thompson, Linebaugh, King, Hussey). Maybe their controversy could be explained by pointing out a difference between the trajectories of gleaning in France and England. What interests me in those opposing accounts is – once again – the re-appearance of two philosophies of commoning: the positive one (of the rebellious commoners defending the right to the commons) and the negative one (product of the state, a marginalized group living on the outskirts of society). The

striking difference between two points of view culminated in changing interpretations of another famous representation of gleaners – Jean-François Millet’s painting *The Gleaners* (1857).

The painting from which Agnes Varda started her narrative in *The Gleaners and I* lead to extremely confused political evaluations. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the image of three poor female gleaners bent over in a field was regarded rather as a powerful social critique and a call to revolution.



Il. 2. J.-F. Millet, *The Gleaners*.

But for Vardi (1993, 1447) it “embodied three centuries of official propaganda concerning the poor and the nature of gleaning. Like the state, Millet created an image distinct from the realities of the harvest. In the nineteenth century, farmers and village communities still refused to conform to these representations”. According to Vardi, on Millet’s picture a section of the marginal and the poor is granted access to the harvest, all the while excluding from it the wider sections of the labouring classes. Again then, Millet’s *Gleaners*, just like the story of Ruth can be seen through the lenses of these two opposing traditions at once: staged either with a subversive pauper, a foreigner, or a marginalized and passive recipient of mercy. The most suitable figure to express these conflicting forces – without subjugating one to the other – is to be found once again in writings of Walter Benjamin.

Besides the already mentioned and much discussed *flâneur*, we encounter there two more marginal figures which are strikingly similar to

the one of the *glaneuse*. Both characters serve as antitypes for Benjamin's lonely urban loungeur, that male who wanders through the streets and among the shop windows and assemblages of commodities contemplating the forces of modernity. His first counterpart is the female *passante*, the second is the ragpicker (*chiffonnier*, or der *Lumpensammler*). The contemplative gaze of the *flâneur* is an ambiguous one – he is in public, but detached from it; he is attracted by modern life, but also becomes a victim of its development, urban renovation, the liquidation of passages, the cult of automobility; his desires are expanded by consumerist capitalism, but cannot find satisfaction in the eternal return of the same, materialized in fashion trends, novelties and innovations, actually deprived of anything authentically new. With the development of productive forces and the expansion of commodity relations, capitalism annihilates the *flâneur* in its strict historical sense, but it universalizes *flânerie* for the whole of consumerist society (Buck-Morss 2006, 37). Hence the *flâneur* proves ultimately unable to liberate utopian dreams from the realm of capitalist spectacle. He also tends to believe that technological progress could fulfill the promises of modernity, had it been used differently. Even if the *flâneur* remains the collector of experiences and the constructor of constellations, I tend to agree with Susan Buck-Morss (2006, 44), who sketches the affinities between him and the freelance journalists, trendsetters and members of the today's creative class. His mode of gleaning, too dependent on the capitalist production, doesn't allow him to become a commoner. His idleness is too leisured to be subversive, and his addiction to commodities too strong to permit his detachment from the bourgeoisie.

As the female counterpart of the *flâneur* who shares his attachment to loitering, but at the same time is forbidden the right to freely appear in public places, there appears the *passante*, or passer-by (Solnit 2006). As in famous poem by Baudelaire with this title, and typically for heroines from Marcel Proust's novels, the female pedestrian escapes cognition. She is the object of the male gaze, that of the *flâneur*. He is active, she is passive (a passer-by); he is allowed to wander, while her public presence is under constant suspicion and threat; he is a type of dandy who liberates and stylizes his personality through fashion, she hides herself behind make-up. As commented on by Buck-Morss (2006, 49-50), in Benjamin the exclusion of women from *flânerie* is expressed in prostitution. The prostitute participates in urban life only negatively, as an intruder or living commodity, paid to satisfy the male desire.

Thus the prostitute and the *glaneuse* share a similar condition of negativity, of being foreclosed from sight and enclosed in the sphere of

reproduction. This is a different type of detachment: while the *flâneur's* disengagement was deliberate and public – she is detached by force and pressured to live on the real margins of the city.

However, as Benjamin teaches, a way to envision something positive, or even question the division between negativity and positivity, may often lead through the juxtaposition of negativities:

it is decisively important to apply to this, at first excluded, negative part a new division so that with a shift of the visual angle (but not the standards!) there emerges in it as well something else positive, new, compared with the earlier description. And so on [ad] infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apokatastasis (Benjamin 2002, 459).

His method would be helpful here to grasp “positivity in negativity”, in the case of the female urban – and rural – loiterer, the *glaneuse*. In her essay on Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, S.D. Chrostowska (2007) disassociates the *glaneuse* and the *flâneur*, to compare her rather to another of Benjamin's minoritarian figures: the ragpicker. According to this author, the subjectivity of the *chiffonnier* should be treated as a key to interpreting not only the figure of the *glaneuse*, but also Varda's filmmaking, her own aesthetic *glaneage*.

There are many reasons to agree with Chrostowska's proposition. Both the *chiffonnier* and Varda as *glaneuse* are simultaneously located on the margins – as the rest of the political body – and in the center of the public life, as uninvited guests who question the legitimate distribution of the sensible; their activities of gathering, collecting, reproducing resembles work and non-work at the same time; in some ways their labour minimalizes capitalist waste, but also acts as an indictment of blind productivism. Human lives patched together with waste, as their clothes, workarounds, equipment – even the whole movie – are montaged from garbage. Varda is a woman, a *glaneuse* and the heroes of her film are almost exclusively men, but the gender division is challenged, they both belong to the common process of reproduction. The reproductive character of their praxis seems to revoke the divisions, like these between the *flâneur* and the *passante*, or differences between males and females, between urban and rural, material and immaterial labour, or labour and art.

The *Chiffonnier* and the *glaneuse* participate – as commoners – in the second circuit of capitalist circulation. *Flâneurs* and prostitutes live in the world of commodities and themselves become commodities, living advertisements – as in the case of the sandwich board man, also present

in Benjamin (Buck-Morss 2006). In contrast to them, the *chiffonier* and the *glaneuse* approach commodities in their afterlife – as waste – giving them second lives, a chance for redemption from forgetfulness. This weak messianic power of preservation through change is crucial for Benjamin's conceptions of temporality and liberation (Löwy 2017, 204–208). Highly distrustful of every promise of progress and accelerationist hopes for the full realization of human potentialities with technology and science. They rather try to pull the bourgeois history to a halt, before it ends in a final crash.

The richness of meanings implicit in the *chiffonier's* figure has been unveiled by Irving Wohlfarth. His remarks are of great importance for our attempt to conceptualize gleaning as the prototype for commoners' *praxis*. For Wohlfarth the practice of the *chiffonier* and that of materialist historian (to whom Benjamin aspires) are practically identical. Both are an "expert cameraman" and expert collectors, skilled in the art of montage. It bestows them with a duplex role: "while he has only a small walk-on part within the whole, he can thus also be considered a miniature version of the whole" (Wohlfarth 1986, 144). The *chiffonier*, being himself an element of a constellation, at the same time possess (or maybe makes use of) its entirety – as its custodian. The German term *der Lumpensammler* expresses after all a similar duality, as the prefix *lumpen* refers not only to rags (*Lumpen*) that the *Lumpensammler* collects, but also to his own being as *Lump*, someone composed from rags (Wohlfarth 1986, 147).

The task to detect positivity in negativity in the case of the social margins was openly postulated by Benjamin in his commentary to Werner Hegemann's work on slums in Berlin (Wohlfarth 1986, 164–165). Benjamin was critical of Hegemann's one-sidedness in portraying slums only in shades of gray, with the inability to see any flash of positivity. The shift that Benjamin demanded, he made by himself in commenting on the ragpickers.

The crucial thing to understand is that the role of the *chiffonier* as collector is not to arrange a new better whole or to reduce waste and thus improve the efficiency of capitalist economy, but to liberate things from the overwhelming and tragic course of history – to let them speak freely: "the historian [as *chiffonier*] is the herald who invites the dead to the table" (Benjamin 2002, 481). Wohlfarth stresses that the *chiffonier* is not meant to help to realize the potentiality of history better or faster. The recourse to the forgotten, defeated and oppressed ones should occur not in order to develop perfect zero-waste recycling (capitalist commo-
ning):

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there are, however, decisive differences between a metaphorical and an actual *chiffonnier*. The latter is so abjectly dependent on the laws of exchange-value that he can reproduce his own existence only by directly serving the reproductive needs of the capitalist economy. (...) his literary counterpart seeks, by contrast, to save his „treasure” from the capitalist order of things in order to construct objects that will help upset its digestive system (Wohlfarth 1986, 152).

The *chiffonnier* appears, firstly, to accuse with his presence alone, to uncover the fact that capitalist history creates waste, amounting to the size of ruins (Wohlfarth 1986, 155) – it stages its negative doing in the landscape of garbage. Secondly, and more crucially, the *chiffonnier* is the one who liberates lost time, who recovers things not in order to bring them back to capitalist circulation, but to withhold them. Thus the *praxis* of the *chiffonnier* is compatible with that of the materialist historian: it discovers positivity in negativity and his activity forever holds out against the dialectics of potency and act (Wohlfarth 1986, 157).

Just like Linebaugh’s collectors of chips who carry out wood to re-compose their life-worlds in autonomous ways, just like Varda’s gleaners who build shelters and furniture from garbage, just like Varda-*glaneuse* herself, who builds cinematic constellations from ready-made, or rather ready-enliven scraps, what the *chiffonnier* creates are not fancy post-modern bricolages, but rather dialectical images, which open possibilities for a different history entirely. The only work that the *chiffonnier* may finish is the one of barricading himself from the dominant history with a barricade made from lumber (Wohlfarth 1986, 150). It serves not as a monument to the victors, but as shelter of the defeated.

Gleaning on the shores of politics

In his book *Hunters, Gatherers and Practitioners of Powerlessness*, the ethnologist Tomasz Rakowski (2016) describes many of such popular barricades constructed during the harshest period of the economic transformation in Poland. The informal ways of acquiring goods – “metal salvaging and the demolition of old buildings (infrastructures): scrap metal, brickwork, digging coal in poverty-bogs, collecting mushrooms and berries, wild herbs, obtaining timber and fir branches, the use of industrial dumps (scrap, non-ferrous metals, plastics, clothing, chemistry – anything that can be useful), poaching” – functioned during that time as modern incarnations of gleaning. The ex-miners, working as diggers

of coal from the poor shafts and pickers of metal from former industrial plants; the field and forest gatherers in the countryside in which state-owned farms ceased to exist; or collectors of leftovers from power plants – they are all contemporary heirs of the *chiffonnier*. Not only do they begin to glean in order to survive in a period of the rapid depletion and destruction of the old life-worlds organized by socialist structures. Their “practices of powerlessness” were the acts of salvation of the lost time which restored the dead to life – they deliver new meanings, senses and modes of orientation.

Every philosophy of *praxis* must be confronted with one obvious question: what is to be done? What are the concrete political conclusions to be drawn? What kind of practices could we promote or defend? Our first reply is also obvious: through the example of gleaning we clearly see that commoning provides the weak and the excluded with a weapon, a custom, and with a means of subsistence. Thus where it exists, it deserves to be decidedly defended, and promoted where it is prohibited. The idea of commoning – understood as a process of collective work opened for everyone willing to participate – and the subject of commoner – as the poor who deserves the right to the commons – must be recognized as legitimate. Today we start to become conscious of the rich and hard to measure varieties and impacts that shadow commoning plays in the reproduction of society. To give one striking example: the informal urban recyclers, called *catadores*, *cartoneros* or bidders, who perform an outstanding job in recovering rare, non-renewable resources in metropolises around the world, face criminalization and violence from the authorities (Bardi 2014).

This is still a modest, defensive postulate. It rests on the negative conception of commoners as the destitute, and of commoning as mere correction to the systemic imbalance of capitalism. The second postulate is more offensive and revolutionary. Our examination of commoners and commoning, whom we followed in the fields, forests, streets and behind camera, and especially in the figures of the *chiffonnier* and the *glaneuse*, should encourage us to re-consider the role of reproductive labour. Of course, it would be all too easy to base the society purely on gathering and the simple reproduction of nature and waste – there is no return to the garden of Eden. But in the times of ecological crisis and various mobilizations of reproductive labourers, it is high time to change the outdated hierarchy between production and reproduction. To this day it is the reproductive labourer that has to prove that his activity is valuable, that it creates “value” or meets the conditions of “real work”. But the efforts to recognize and re-evaluate the potentiality of

reproductive labour too often goes hand in hand with an anti-workerist stance towards the industrial proletariat. It is as if working people – coal miners, truck drivers or woodcutters – were responsible for the ecological crisis. The appreciation of reproductive labour must not be confused with degradation or attacks on productive labourers. Instead of swapping places between productive and reproductive workers, our challenge is to notice and build on the reproductive dimension which is also included in productive labour. The industrial proletariat has its role to play in developing the autonomy of commoners. Once liberated from the capitalist order, industrial workers could serve new purposes – that of the reproduction of plebeian life-worlds. Their activities would be subordinated not to capitalist accumulation, but to a sustainable future, organized by principles of inclusive and caring reproduction.

Just as the *chiffonier* in Benjamin is not a dustman hired to solve problems with garbage, and the *glaneuse* is not a wage-worker for the landlord, so reproductive labour – understood as commoning – cannot be reduced to one form of work among many. Reproduction serves as a condition of the possibility of every form of work and even more – of life itself. As I prepare my article, humanity struggles with the global pandemic of COVID-19. The social role played during the economic lockdowns by reproductive workers – doctors, nurses, cashiers, truck-drivers etc. – should make us more aware of the crucial role that reproduction plays for our joint welfare and survival.

The great question for today is the possibility of the autonomization of commoning. Is it feasible to organize our reproduction outside the structures of capital and the state? James C. Scott (2009), in his daring book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, uncovered the neglected histories of fugitives, people on the run, who create and maintain non-state institutions. Scott managed to prove that these marooned societies are not the remains of the past. Far from that, their fate is defined by a constant struggle with the states and their linear history. Although the author sowed skepticism about contemporary possibilities to create the non-capitalist outside in common, there are many glimpses – some more trackable, others rather clandestine – of cracks in today's capitalism (Holloway 2010). If we cease to regard the common as a thing – as a resource, territory, geographical or political entity – and re-define it as the multiplied practice – as commoning – then we will note many *chiffoniers* and *glaneuses* around the world, undermining the capitalist course of history and opening the alternatives: in communal organizations in Rojava or in Chiapas; in liberated districts, and social centers; in the informal economy and migrant networks.

The serious, huge and truly historical task of the *chiffonnier* and the *glaneuse* is to re-arrange the constellation of the world in order to maintain the life of the planet. Here comes the historical materialist who, as Benjamin demanded, must himself become a *chiffonnier* or a *glaneuse*, before the pile of debris he is facing grows skyward. It is the fate of commoners to sort it out. The ragpicker or the despised idler can become the heroes of our day.

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Tytuł: Zbierając na brzegach politycznego. Wspólnianie jako nowa filozofia *praxis*

Abstrakt: Artykuł włącza się w prowadzoną ostatnio przez teoretyków dóbr wspólnych dyskusję nad znaczeniem pojęcia wspólniania (*commoning*). Proponuje uznać za podstawową cechę wyróżniającą praktyki wspólniania zdolność do reprodukcji autonomii plebejskich światów życia, które potencjalnie wykraczać mogą ku post-kapitalistycznej przyszłości. Rozumienie wspólniania jako aktywności podejmowanych przez zmarginalizowane podmiotowości zostało zaprezentowane na przykładzie zbieractwa. Ta tradycyjna czynność biedoty została w artykule poddana analizie jako dwuznaczna praktyka, która wymyka się dychotomiom działania i pasywności, pozytywności i negatywności, produkcji i reprodukcji. Zbieractwo, wraz ze swoimi reprodukcyjnymi cechami, potraktowane zostało jako modelowy fenomen dla wspólniania, rozumianego jako nowa filozofia *praxis*, która pozostaje tak pożądana w dobie katastrofy ekologicznej i w obliczu zerwanych połączeń między pracą a opieką. Historia walk społecznych wokół zbieractwa i dóbr wspólnych, a także podmiotowości biednej pokłościcy (*glaneuse*) i miejskiego szmacciarza (*chiffonnier*), zostają przywołane w artykule, by rozpoznać niedoceniany potencjał wspólniania do zakłócenia dziejów ślepego produktywizmu i – poprzez dążenie do odzyskania dóbr wspólnych – także do odzyskania naszej przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: wspólnianie, zbieractwo, *praxis*, dobra wspólne, motłoch