



Economies of commoning – new frameworks for citizen participation?

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* *The star stands for translations from German to English by the author of this paper.*

Abstract:

Initiatives and activists around the world are experimenting with alternatives to dominant forms of living to tackle pressing social and environmental problems. Several issues seem to reoccur for both engaged citizens and aspiring ones: the lack of time for sustained engagement, due to the mechanisms of the ‘market’, and other outer influences around us that shape the way we look at the world, such as culture, family, social networks, school and education. As a result, the transition to a more sustainable and just future seems difficult to achieve beyond rhetoric.

To overcome these issues, many initiatives experiment with new economic frameworks based on the philosophy of the commons. Through practices of sharing, collaboration and cooperation, they interrogate the dominant cultural value systems of property and wage-motivated labour. The current international debates on the introduction of a basic income for all citizens opens up further questions on how we work, share, and live within our societies. This paper examines the potentials of emergent ‘economies of commoning’ to strengthen urban communities, reconstruct the commons, and support neighbourhood participation.

Taking previous interviews with activists and case studies conducted for the co-edited book *Agents of Alternatives – Re-designing Our Realities* and own experiences with community initiatives in Helsinki and Berlin as a starting point for analysis, this paper looks in more detail at two cases concerned with the basic income: the German crowdfunding experiment ‘Mein Grundeinkommen’¹ (My Basic Income) and the Swiss cultural initiative ‘Grundeinkommen’² (Basic Income). As a theoretical framework for this analysis, I investigate and draw together relational theories about the ‘commons’, ‘community economies’, and the ‘ecommony’ (an economy based on the commons and care) by feminist authors such as Silvia Federici, Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, J.K. Gibson-Graham and Friederike Habermann. Finally, the paper argues for an increase in ‘time wealth’ as a result of these economies, offering the necessary mental and physical spaces for citizens to become engaged in more meaningful ways with society to move towards a more just and ecological future.

Key words: commons, community economies, social relations, basic income, time wealth

1 Mein Grundeinkommen. Accessed November 8, 2016. <https://www.mein-grundeinkommen.de/>

2 Grundeinkommen. Accessed November 8, 2016. <http://www.grundeinkommen.ch/>

1. Introduction:

In this paper, I take up a two-fold perspective: the one of the ‘citizen designer’ (Fuad-Luke, Hirscher, Moebus 2015) and the professional designer that are both engaged in designing for positive societal change. I build on my own previous involvements and experiences with civic initiatives in Helsinki (*Public School Helsinki*) and Berlin (*Trade School Berlin, European Alternatives, Kiezacker*) and the research and co-editing of the book ‘Agents of Alternatives – Re-designing Our Realities’ (Fuad-Luke, Hirscher, Moebus 2015), featuring interviews and case studies with a diverse range of activists and groups engaged in building a more just and ecological future. A common observation in all of these activities is the struggle for parallel co-existence with a capitalist system that is built on individualism and competitiveness, hyper-efficiency and profit-making, exploitation, growth and inequality. Facing this dilemma, a feminist perspective on the economy that includes all other activities that are necessary for the reproduction of life, (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen 1986, Gibson-Graham 2006a) inherits emancipatory potential to encourage people to “take back the economy”³ from the ‘experts’ and construct an economy based on the “diverse processes and interrelations through which we (human and more-than-human) constitute livelihoods”, (Gibson-Graham & Miller 2015, 4) with the commons at its core. By developing a typology of different ‘economies of commoning’, I aim to find answers to the broader research question of my current PhD project at Sheffield University School of Architecture: what specific forms of commons and economic frameworks are needed to enable civic participation and what kind of participation would that be?

Thus in this paper, I attempt to bring together current debates on the commons with feminist writings and relational theories to examine their potentials towards “a structural alternative to capitalism” (Federici 2013), whilst challenging the patriarchal structures that are still prevalent in our mindsets and social relations. Two cases promoting an unconditional income will add to this critical analysis as a claim for a “caring democracy” (Tronto 2013) as the basis to negotiate our common wealth in the first place.

2. Commons as a relational framework

*“Commons are not essentially material things but are social relations, constitutive social practices”
(Federici & Caffentzis 2014, 11)*

“As capitalist social relations are deeply intertwined with patriarchal ones, every struggle from the perspective of politics of commons has to be a feminist one.” (Deborah Sielert)

In my quest of understanding the commons and their potential for positive societal change on many levels, I resonate a lot with feminist Marxist and ecofeminist theories, where relations and reproduction play a dominant role in constructing the commons with respect to the invisible exploitation of nature and more-than-human others. When I speak of commons in this paper, I align with Massimo De Angelis’ understanding of commons as a system consisting of three key elements: common goods (not to be confused with commons), a community (the plurality of commoners) that sustains and creates commons, and the set of their relations (commoning) (De Angelis 2017, 18-19). According to him, this third element is the most important for understanding the commons. This definition can be

3 In reference to Gibson-Graham’s book ‘Take Back the Economy’ (2013).

expanded by a feminist perspective:

“In our view, we cannot simply say “no commons without community.” We must also say “No commons without economy,” in the sense of oikonomia, i.e., the reproduction of human beings within the social and natural household. Hence, reinventing the commons is linked to the reinvention of the communal and a commons-based economy.” (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999)

This aligns strongly with Federici’s take on reproduction, which she frames as the “fundamental terrain on which we begin to transform our social relations.”⁴ Reproduction is a classical Marxist term which refers to the manifold ways in which society is reproduced materially and socially through everyday tasks such as cooking and cleaning to serve the maintenance of labour power. Since approximately the 16th century, it was increasingly women who were held responsible for this domestic labor in the transition period from feudalism to capitalism: “But the economic importance of the reproduction of labor-power carried out in the home, and its function in the accumulation of capital became invisible, being mystified as a natural vocation and labelled “women’s labor”.” (Federici 2004)

In recent debates around this topic, the term ‘care’ has become firmly established to describe reproductive activities in a more positive way. Care involves all the activities that reproduce life, including domestic work, child rearing, caring for the elderly and sick, looking after the environment and our neighbourhoods, and also producing knowledge and culture. Economist and historian Friederike Habermann differentiates between reproduction and care as such: reproduction as unpaid labour exploited by capitalism, and care as reproduction’s inherent potential for an economy based on non-monetary relations (2016, 27). This links up with the ‘ethics of care’, a feminine approach to the relational first introduced by Carol Gilligan in 1982. It was criticised by many feminist scholars as essentialist, opposing that gender roles are socially and culturally constructed. Habermann also underlines more attention to a queer-feminist perspective, warning that the construction of identity is mainly based on hegemonic power relations and “co-produced by the profiting subjects (men, whites etc.)” (2008, 2013, 2016). Nevertheless these power relations result, as architect-activist Doina Petrescu points out, in different epistemologies driven by gender: “the reinvention of the commons is a work of the ‘relational’ and the ‘differential’⁵ in which feminine subjectivity has an active role to play. (...) As such, the imagining of a collective subjectivity that reinvents the commons requires the mobilization of feminist knowledge.” (2010)

Federici also argues for a feminist perspective on the commons, as she posits social relations and practices as constituent to their construction, (Federici & Caffentzis 2014, 11) and argues further that

“(...) we cannot build an alternative society and a strong self-reproducing movement unless we redefine our reproduction in a more cooperative way and put an end to the separation between the personal and the political, and between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life” (Federici 2012).

4 This quote stems from a public talk Federici gave for the Museum of Art and Design (MAD) in NYC in 2014, entitled “Silvia Federici: Women, Reproduction, and the Construction of Commons” (at ca. 41 min) which can be seen here: <http://www.artandeducation.net/videos/silvia-federici-women-reproduction-and-the-construction-of-commons/>

5 Differential refers to the idea of difference feminism where the differences between men and women form the basis for its epistemological approach.

Here Federici refers to the slogan “the personal is political”⁶ which was prominent in the struggle of second-wave feminism fighting for more visibility and acknowledgement of everyday activities in order to claim the everyday as a political realm. Consequently, ecofeminist Maria Mies asks for a “profound transformation in our everyday life, in order to recombine what the social division of labor in capitalism has separated” (1999). She reasons that the distancing of production from reproduction and consumption has led to the current status quo where we are unable to grasp the conditions under which our daily needs are met and what global impacts we produce. Mies asks for a perspective from below, the ‘subsistence perspective’, that looks at the whole of the ‘capitalist-patriarchal iceberg’ including the invisible economies below the water line: nature, the colonies, domestic labour, subsistence work, and any other kind of informal work.

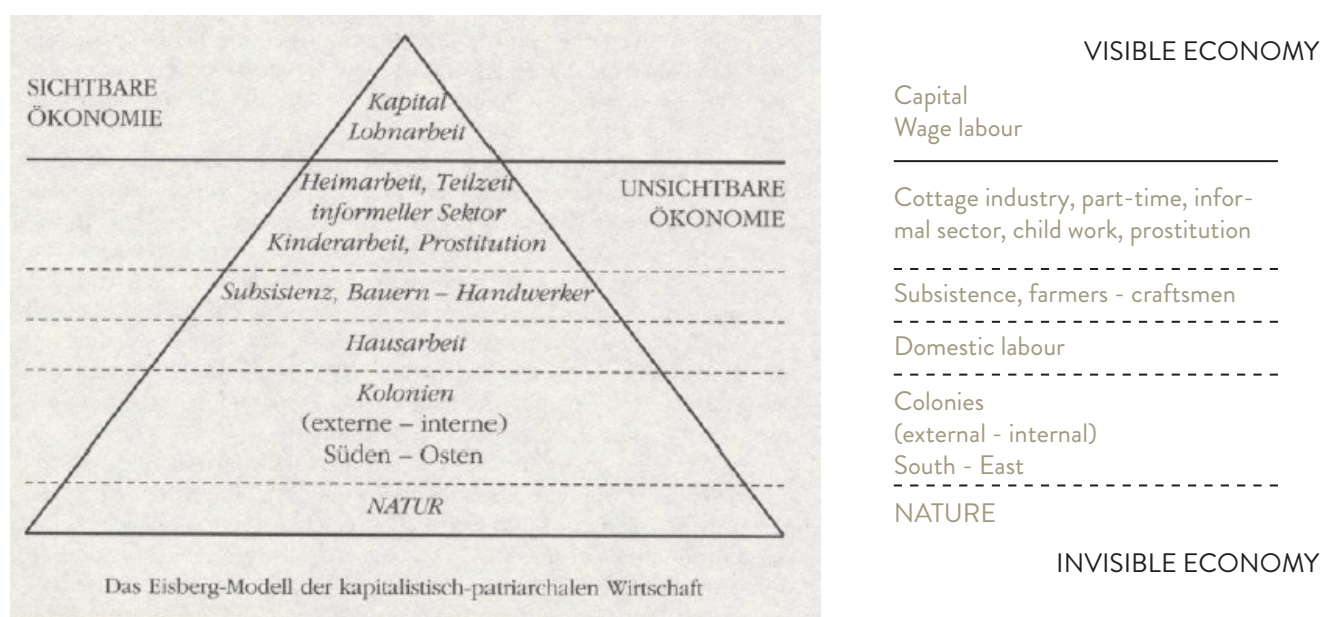


Fig. 1: Iceberg model of the capitalist-patriarchal economy*

This model of the economy was developed by her and Bennholdt-Thomsen in the 1980s, with certain similarities to the one by J.K. Gibson-Graham which I will explore later on in this paper.⁷ It questions the growing dependence on capital through the loss of ‘subsistence skills’ (Bennholdt-Thomsen & Mies 1997, 25*) and calls for the acknowledgement and making visible of the exploitation of unpaid labour of both human and more-than-human others in capitalism. Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies see this perspective as an approach not only to overcome patriarchy and colonialism, the “preconditions of the modern industrial system,” (Ibid, 27*) but also to free nature within and around us from the self-destructive capitalist logic of endless growth. Calls for deconstructing the autonomous subject separate from our ecosystem acknowledging that we are, actually, a commons (Mattei 2012), could become entry points to that profound transformation Mies was asking for above:

‘No common is possible unless we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them. Indeed, if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject.’ (Federici 2010)

6 See Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political,” <http://www.carolhanisch.org/Chwritings/PIP.html>. Accessed 4.6.2017.

7 See pp. 9 in this paper.

3. “Commons that care”⁸

Care theorist Joan Tronto sees neoliberalism not just as a form of economic existence, but as an “all-encompassing ideology” that has taken over all spheres of our lives and relationships: “Neoliberalism is not only a description of economic life, it is also an ethical system that posits that only personal responsibility matters.” (Tronto 2013, 38). For her, and from a feminist standpoint of an ethics of care, individuals are conceived of as being in relationships where people give and receive care at all times with shifting needs and capabilities (Ibid, 30-31). Care introduces a logic that is unconditional, not driven by profit, and cannot be subdued by the market. How are care and the commons related though? Both are based on cooperation beyond the logics of the market and state. Both activities, caring and commoning, are motivated by the provision for something. Care as a form of action involves, according to architect Kim Trogal in her thesis investigating the relationship between care and space, a variety of domains and spaces, such as economy and ecology (commons), the body (‘public’ spaces), education (educational institutions), and collective organisations (connections) (Trogal 2012). To illustrate these domains, I draw on my personal experiences with civic initiatives and projects I was previously involved with in Helsinki and Berlin in the past 7 years: the *Public School Helsinki* (2010-12), *Trade School Berlin* (2013/14), *Kiezacker* (2015/16) and *Trojan Horse Summer School* (2016).

All of these initiatives had education at their core, where knowledge was shared amongst participants from the neighbourhood or a set community on a mutual and horizontal basis. In none of the initiatives, money was involved – the exchange of knowledge was mostly based on the principle of giving or gifting for the sake of contributing to a community without a direct reciprocal exchange. This principle is in line with Geneviève Vaughan critique of the exchange logic, which, according to her, creates a sphere ‘that is not nourishing because the coercion of reciprocity destroys (...) the implicit appreciation of the other.’ (2000/2012) This was a problem I encountered directly during my involvement with *Trade School Berlin*, where knowledge is exchanged on a barter basis. *Trade School* was set up as an experiment by New York City artists Caroline Woolard, Rich Watts, and Louise Ma in 2009 and has since evolved into a network of more than 25 city-specific nodes as a framework that can be adopted by anyone in any location.⁹ For most teachers, the possibility of being able to share their skills and knowledge and, through that, become part of a community around it was already enough of an ‘exchange’ - similar to the idea of Couchsurfing (at its best), where the founding idea was to contribute to a sharing community with no direct remuneration. Getting a barter item directly in return, whether it was material or immaterial, made some teachers feel uneasy as it felt like a payment (“I don’t need anything!”; “I was happy to do it!”). This was my experience in Berlin, but how each school works naturally depends on local conditions and needs. I see *Trade School* as an interesting experiment in terms of exploring value from different personal viewpoints, and in terms of thinking about one’s possibilities to contribute beyond money. It can generate useful insights for the transition to a possible ‘post-money utopia’.¹⁰

8 This quote is taken from the title of Deborah Sielert’s essay ‘Commons that Care. Feminist Interventions in the Construction of the Commons.’ (Un)usual Business Reader ¼. Available as pdf here: http://unusualbusinessreader.cascoprojects.org/wp-content/uploads/ub-deborah_sielert-commons_that_care.pdf. Accessed 3.6.2017.

9 More info: <http://tradeschool.coop>. Accessed 18.06.2017.

10 This was the title of a 1-day seminar on May 13th 2017 at Supermarkt Berlin, where a range of different post-money activists presented their visions. More info: <http://www.supermarkt-berlin.net/event/post-money-utopias/>. Accessed 4.6.2017.



Img 1.: Trade School Berlin's project space in Kreuzberg, hosted by Boys Club.



Img 2.: Building an urban cob oven in Helsinki at a construction site open for temporary use.

At the *Public School Helsinki*,¹¹ the basic idea was about generating temporary spaces for knowledge exchange. There was never a fixed location (though this differs from city to city), and locations depended on the class taking place. Governance was rotated amongst an organising committee which could moderate and schedule class proposals. What was particularly interesting was that it was not necessary to be a knowledgeable teacher in order to propose a class – people could also suggest something they'd like to learn and look in the community for a teacher, and if none was found, try to teach it to each

11 More info at: <http://thepublicschool.org>. Accessed 18.06.2017.

other through online tutorials and other sources. This was empowering in such a sense that the genuine need for a specific kind of knowledge could be satisfied on a mutual and horizontal basis, where everyone was teacher and learner at the same time. In 2010, I used the platform to organise a cob oven building class on a construction site in Helsinki open for temporary use, where none of the participants – including myself – had any experience in using this technique. We researched collectively where to get instructions (from an online tutorial) and the necessary materials (from construction sites and nature) and managed to build a functioning urban cob oven for free and open use by Helsinki citizens (Moebus 2012, 2015).

To take the experiences from these two “schools” further, architect Melissa Harrison and I initiated an early version of a neighbourhood academy together in 2016 called *Kiezacker*.¹² We asked people what they could contribute and what they’d like to learn. An issue, as before with *Trade School*, was that people were reluctant to teach their specific skill as many didn’t have any experience in teaching. Also, the issue of what people would get back in return came up – which could be both an issue of a reciprocal ‘habitus’ and one of true economic need. In a next iteration, also for the practical part of my current PhD research at Sheffield University, we plan to tackle and explore this issue further with the commons as a basis for all interactions.

The methods developed at *Kiezacker* proved useful in a smaller context while I was part of the *Trojan Summer School*¹³ for ‘critical design practices’ on a small island in Southern Finland in 2016. Students came up with the things they wanted to learn and share with others, created a flexible schedule for the days we spent together and taught each other in different formats and ways. The classes ranged from love meditation over knot-making to nature observation, morning gymnastics, YouTube-sessions on the economy and many more.

Depending on the kind of community behind each initiative, the foci of the classes offered shifted between the practical and the theoretical, in both cases creating strong links amongst its members. What I find particularly interesting, is that it was predominantly hands-on practical knowledge that was exchanged in the different projects. There is a rising interest in DIY-practices around the world that empowers people to reclaim their means of production and to become less dependent of the market by acquiring knowledge and resources from self-managed communities. As I previously wrote in an essay for the book ‘Agents of Alternatives – Re-designing Our Realities’ (2015) in reference to Richard Sennett (2008), making puts us in touch with the world around us and enriches our lives by the multiple relations that come into being, both material and immaterial ones. Mostly without knowing or being aware of the concept of the commons, the act of commoning knowledge and resources became part of each project. They grew into what Friederike Habermann describes as “peninsulas against the current” (2009*): “spaces of other implicitnesses (...) in which we bring to life collaboration, commoning, ecommony, care logics, or however we want to call it (...) [where people] start changing, whether we want or know or not.”

Looking again at Trogal’s variety of domains and spaces touched by care (economy and ecology (commons), the body (‘public’ spaces), education (educational institutions), and collective organisations (connections), all of these were touched by the different projects described above: in terms of content, issues with space and economics, learning approaches, and organising and maintaining a community.

12 More info at: <http://kiezacker.de>. Accessed 18.06.2017.

13 More info at: <http://trojanhorse.fi>. Accessed 18.06.2017.

It remains to be explored further how these domains and spaces can become sustainable and governed as a commons. Here, Habermann's 'ecommony' and J.K. Gibson-Graham's 'community economies' could offer potential insights.

4. 'Ecommony' & 'community economies' as commons frameworks

'Ecommony' is a term coined by Habermann to describe an economy that is based on commons-based peer production. Peer stands for equality, implying a production without coercion and hierarchies. The term commons-based peer production goes back to jurist Yochai Benkler and describes the ways in which free software is produced – based on commons and producing commons (2006). 'Ecommony' relies on the interaction of needs and capabilities beyond market and state, governed by a community of commoners. Habermann describes it through the following four principles:¹⁴

1. *Ownership instead of property: it counts what is needed and used, not the right to exclude others or for selling;*
2. *Share what you can;*
3. *Contributing instead of exchanging: become active out of inner motivation, with secured access to resources;*
4. *Openness and voluntariness.*

The first and third principle are similar to Karl Marx's idea of abilities and needs, and describe the economic sides of production and of consumption – the second and fourth principle are a result of the other two. Habermann takes a closer look at consumption and the access to resources, which is closely linked to property and ownership – two English terms chosen deliberately to differentiate between the two German concepts 'Eigentum' and 'Besitz'. She links the idea of Erich Fromm's 'functional property', the right to use a resource, to the commons as an early definition. The legal understanding of property, instead, excludes others from the right to use a resource, as opposed to ownership, which merely means to have something at disposal. Our material dependence and anthropocentric vision of the environment as a mere resource becomes evident in this and opens up the following question: can the commons make these power relationships obsolete for both humans and our co-natural world?

The third principle of 'Ecommony', contributing instead of exchanging, is closely linked to the logic of care. Habermann sees commons and care intrinsically linked and reasons as follows: both are based on cooperation beyond the logics of the market and state. Both principles are related to an understanding of nature as 'pachamama', the indigenous approach to 'mother earth', where humans are understood as a part of nature, not as a dominator of it. Furthermore, in a society where identities are constructed based on prevailing hegemonic conditions, she points out how queer feminism can open up new perspectives on how we understand power relations and the societal conditions of our human existence, so that "all people can be who they want to be – not as the fulfilment of a predetermined natural identity, but as the fulfilment of the possible potentials of the interplay between 'reality' and society." (2016, 37*) Habermann refers to her former book 'Der Homo Oeconomicus und das Andere' (2008) (*Home Oeconomicus and the other**) to stress how strongly our identities are linked to the economy – in order to change ourselves, we need to change the world around us – in line with Foucault (1983) and Gibson-Graham (2006b, xiv), as you will read later in this paper.

14 The following paragraphs are based on a review I previously wrote about Habermann's book 'Ecommony' (2016).

Examples of an ecommony in practice are plentiful, such as the shared use of everyday items in neighbourhoods (e.g. *Fairleihen.de*), sharing homes with strangers from around the world (e.g. *Warm Showers.org*), the emergence of borrowing shops (e.g. *Leila Berlin*¹⁵), saving and sharing food from the bin (e.g. *foodsharing.de*), creating a new abundance for all rather than the monkish abstinence and scarcity often feared in debates around degrowth – as long as these potentials are not turned into commodities by the market, as it has been happening through some profit-making companies in the – by commoners often critically seen – sharing economy. Not only material resources, but also skills, abilities and knowledge can be shared, as online learning communities and platforms, creative commons licenses, Wikipedia, and other free knowledge initiatives show. They also make evident that people like to be active and productive out of an inner intrinsic motivation in order to contribute to something bigger. Habermann outlines a conception of work based on contribution that moves away from the widely spread barter logic, quoting Brigitte Kratzwald:

“Humans do not only have consumptive, but also productive needs. It is satisfactory to contribute something to society, to be able to take part in shaping our society – given the conditions are adequate and can be chosen freely, and that one’s actions receive appropriate recognition.” (Kratzwald 2014)*

Another economic framework I find particularly useful to explore further in dialogue with the commons is the concept of ‘community economies’ representing the diverse economy framework elaborated by feminist Marxist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham. They frame the economy in an empowering way by emphasising that there already exist a multitude of economic activities not necessarily recognised as such next to capitalist production. Like Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, they draw on the image of an iceberg to depict the economy, but maybe in a more positive way to illustrate “the idea that economies are always diverse and always in the process of becoming” (Community Economies Collective 2014). The iceberg represents the economy as a whole, with the part above the water representing what we usually understand as ‘the economy’ – mostly, wage labor and production for a market in a capitalist business – while below the waterline exists a hidden world of economic diversity, including activities “in schools, on the streets, in neighborhoods, within families, illegal, volunteer, gifts, barter, and non-capitalist firms” (Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 68–72).

“Representing the diverse economy is a deconstructive process that displaces the binary hierarchies of market/non-market and capitalism/non-capitalism, turning singular generalities into multiple particularities, and yielding a radically heterogeneous economic landscape (...). As a practice of development, constructing a community economy is an ethical project of acknowledging relationships and making connections, rather than a technical project of activating generic logics of growth.” (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, xiv)

For Gibson-Graham, this deconstructive process of becoming is by no means automatic: “if to change ourselves is to change our worlds, and if that relationship is reciprocal, then the project of history making is never a distant one, but always right here, on the borders of our sensing, thinking, feeling, moving bodies”, (Ibid, xvi) which aligns with Habermann’s observation on how strongly our identities are linked to the economy and vice-versa. Gibson-Graham point out that most people don’t recognise themselves as significant actors and shapers of the economy (2013) – as soon as we start seeing ourselves as “economic actors with multiple roles” (Ibid), we can begin to redesign, shape, and ‘take back’

15 More info: <http://leila-berlin.de>. Accessed 13.06.2017.

our economies little by little. For that, we need different “representations and framings” that enable other economic practices and materialisations (Community Economies Collective 2014). The diverse economy/community economy framework could offer such a different representation “as a field in which we have the power to intervene and that we can mould by making new economies in the here and now”, creating “economies that allow to resist absolute dependence on wage labour and subordination to precarising capitalist relations”, as the socio-politically engaged design duo *Brave New Alps* points out (2016, 8-9).



Fig. 2: *The ice-berg image drawn by Ken Byrne.*¹⁶

For building a community economy, Gibson-Graham identify four ethical foci together with their collaborators in academia and practice: necessity, surplus, consumption, and commons, in order to reflect and negotiate other economies. In their most recent publication ‘Take Back the Economy’, they describe this process as “(...) a space of decision making where we recognize and negotiate our interdependence with other humans, other species, and our environment. In the process of recognizing and negotiating, we become a community” (2013, xix). Community in this sense is not the ground but an outcome of constant negotiation of the economy, which touches the way we work, do business, organise our markets, property, and finance as the five economic practices identified by Gibson-Graham. They use the metaphor of a community garden in order to encourage thinking in a range of scales – from planet Earth to the individual – and to offer “a simple vision of interdependence among the gardeners, other people, and the natural world” (Ibid, xvi). In this sense, our economy becomes a commons that needs to be taken back and cared for by its multiple actors – and by doing so, a growing community of interdependent subjects and relations.

¹⁶ Featured on the website of the Community Economies Collective and the Community Economies Research Network. Source: <http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home/Key-Ideas> (Accessed: 02 June 2017)

5. Commons and an unconditional income

"We need a basis of community and solidarity so that we can negotiate our common wealth."
(Federici 2014)

"At a time of permanent crisis and constant assaults on our jobs, wages, social spaces, the construction of commons is becoming a necessary means of survival."
(Federici & Caffentzis 2014, 4-5)

It is a bit like the chicken or the egg dilemma – what comes first, community or the commons? What causes and affects the other? As I have just referenced Gibson-Graham, community is the outcome of a constant process of becoming – but how can such a process be initiated, particularly in the relatively rich countries of the global North where given societal and economic conditions don't necessarily force people (yet) to change their socio-economic behaviours (as they are not directly affected by the exploitation of nature and people in the global South)?

When hundreds of thousands of people became unemployed in Argentina after the economic crisis, people started to take over factories, to engage in barter, to help their neighbours, to open up schools in order to teach themselves how to "make their own history" (Gibson-Graham 2006b). In order to do so, they had to remake themselves, they were just like 'the rest of us': "They wanted jobs, not a community economy." (Ibid, xvi) They became engaged in a process of transforming their economic subjectivities, a challenge Foucault had identified already many years before, quoting for Gibson-Graham:

"The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the economy... but to liberate us both from the economy and from the type of individualization that is linked to the economy. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries." (Foucault 1983, 216)

How can we refuse this kind of imposed individuality and who has imposed it on us in the first place? If it is the economy that shapes us and our behaviours, how can we start changing our mindsets and habits on a larger structural scale? According to Giddens, "the day to day activity of social actors draws upon and reproduces structural features of wider social systems" (1984, 24). So what if this wider social system would promote solidarity, an unconditional secured existence for all, the recognition of our mutual dependencies and the possibility to contribute positively to our societies? The introduction of an unconditional income could be a way to change our social practices and economic subjectivities, as it would essentially change the ways in which we motivate, justify, and perceive our and other people's everyday activities. It would provide the necessary social security and space of possibilities that people need in order to grapple with new ways of working and relating to each other. It has the potential to reevaluate reproductive activities and to give new incentives to care: for each other, the environment, and oneself.

The debates around the introduction of an unconditional income have become more and more heated internationally with several countries, such as Finland amongst others, testing and experimenting with a variety of different approaches. The question really is, independently from whether it is financially viable or not: is the unconditional income a fix for it all or just a step on the emancipatory ladder of

humans towards a more autonomous life? What would come next?

In the following, I will be looking at two case studies in Europe, the German crowdfunding initiative ‘Mein Grundeinkommen’ and the Swiss initiative and plebiscite ‘Grundeinkommen’ to illustrate public opinions and first experiences with an unconditional income. Michael Bohmeyer initiated ‘Mein Grundeinkommen’ in 2014 to give people the opportunity to experience a year without existential fear made possible through a basic income. He was motivated by his own experience of receiving monthly profits similar to a basic income after backing out of an online shop he had co-founded. He was curious to explore what people would do with a basic income, how they would experience it and what kind of potentials it would release (Mein Grundeinkommen 2017). The project is by no means a scientific study, but it has managed to create an almost entirely autonomous economic space for experimentation, independent from market and state. This space is co-produced by many as the money distributed to people is raised through an ongoing crowdfunding campaign. People can contribute financially starting from 1 €. Every time 12.000 € are raised, there is a drawing of winners amongst the people who support the campaign regularly on a monthly basis (the ‘Crowdhörnchen’) and others who signed up for it, without any preconditions. So far, 59.054 people have financed 89 basic incomes¹⁷, which sums up to over a million Euros. Reading the supportive comments and the large media interest, it seems to be a timely campaign with more and more people in favour of a basic income.

Most people who participate(d) in the experiment confirmed what proponents of an unconditional income bring forward as positive arguments: less anxiety, more civic engagement, self-fulfilment and development, more time for family and socialising. Meera Zaremba, who works for the initiative as a political campaigner, summarises the experiences of the people who won a year of unconditional income in three main thesis:

1. *It would lead to a new societal atmosphere of optimism and change, where people are healthier and less worried about their existence and could therefore face current political, social, and ecological challenges in a more experimental and creative manner;*
2. *It would give people the possibility to change careers or widen horizons during their lives in reaction to the fast-changing working world, possibly resulting in a more flexible educational system;*
3. *It could cultivate a new understanding of work and give unpaid labour more value and recognition, such as care, parenthood and non-profit engagement.*^{*18}

How would people vote about a basic income though if it could become political reality? Last year, the Swiss were given the opportunity to participate in a historical plebiscite on the introduction of a basic income in their country, induced by the popular petition ‘Volksinitiative für ein bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen’, which was launched by the Swiss initiative ‘Initiative Grundeinkommen’ (IG). The initiative has already existed since 2006 and was set up by artist Enno Schmidt and entrepreneur Daniel Häni. Their approach is quite different from the German project previously described: primarily, they use different cultural means to advocate and promote an unconditional income to a wide audience in order to keep the debate going. In 2008, they published a movie called ‘Grundeinkommen – ein Kulturimpuls’ (*Basic income – a cultural impulse**)¹⁹ which has been watched over 700 000

17 Source: <https://www.mein-grundeinkommen.de>. Accessed 1.6.2017.

18 Zaremba, M. (2017) Wie das digitale Grundeinkommen unsere Gesellschaft verändern könnte. (How the digital basic income could change our society.) <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/wie-das-digitale-grundeinkommen-unsere-gesellschaft-könnte-zaremba>. Accessed May 11th 2017.

19 The movie can be watched here: <http://grundeinkommen.tv/grundeinkommen-ein-kulturimpuls-2/>.

times.²⁰ In 2015, they launched a book called ‘Was fehlt wenn alles da ist?’ (*What is missing when we have everything?*²¹ - Häni & Kovce 2015), just in time for the plebiscite. The question the book raises is evocative: how come Switzerland, a country that ‘has everything’, is the first country to vote on a basic income? What does it mean to ‘have everything’ in the first place? As Silvia Federici observes, the “loss [of the commons] is expanding our awareness of the significance of their existence and increasing our desire to learn more about them” (Federici & Caffentzis 2014, 4). With rising privatisation and enclosures of former commons, and wage labour as the only way to sustain oneself with disregard to its negative impacts elsewhere in the world, it seems like there is a common search for an alternative.

‘Initiative Grundeinkommen’ intended to raise the public imagination for such an alternative with a well-designed campaign including artistic interventions in public space, robot marches, and the final vote as a beautifully orchestrated culmination of the campaign. They managed well to draw a lot of attention to the topic, but people do not seem to be quite ready yet – 23.1 % voted for a basic income. IG sees this as a success, as Daniel Häni reacts: “23% is a lot more than we would have expected. It means the debate continues, also internationally.”²¹ With the current experiment in Finland and many other countries showing an interest in a basic income, he is definitely right.



Img. 3: Generation Grundeinkommen. Guinness book record for the biggest poster world-wide: 8.115,53 m2.

20 Source: <http://www.grundeinkommen.ch/uber-uns/> Accessed 1.6.2017.

21 See: www.grundeinkommen.ch/ueberuns/. Accessed 1.6.2017.



Img. 4: *Generation Grundeinkommen. Robot march in Zurich, April 2016.*

Can we think of the unconditional income as a commoning practice? It depends on the way it is financed, framed and motivated: if it is essentially about redistribution, solidarity and a redefinition of work and reproduction, it could become a commoning practice as it would give everyone equal access to a common wealth that needs continuous collective governance and reconstruction. A basic income could also act as a framework enabling commoning practices, as it would provide the necessary mental and physical spaces to re-educate ourselves, to learn more about the complex issues our world is facing today for which there is no or too little time when caught in the hamster wheel of wage labour and other daily obligations. Being able to common is a privilege that is not available to everyone – you need a certain level of agency, awareness, knowledge, self-organisation skills, and social networks in order to create commons. Through this, it could add traction to existing movements by making it possible for more commoners to join. Existential necessities such as having to pay the rent is often the only motivation for people to stay in their jobs that are destructive to the environment, themselves or others, as author Marianne Gronemeyer notes:

“All work that is being traded today on the job market is more damaging than useful. Whoever was lucky enough to snatch a job hazards the harmful consequences.”
(Gronemeyer 2012*)

A basic income could motivate people to give up such harmful work and get engaged in more meaningful and constructive activities and change the world of work towards one that is driven by real needs and necessities, rather than by market forces aiming merely at profit with disregard to its negative impacts. Most importantly though, as Blaschke, Praetorius, and Schrupp, all renowned proponents of an unconditional income in Germany, point out: feminist and post-patriarchal perspectives

must be part of conceptualising an unconditional income (2016). Otherwise, it could result in a strengthening of existing power structures and be misunderstood as a payment for reproductive work, with no incentive or possibility for other activities. According to Gabriele Winker, active in the 'Care Revolution' movement in Germany, the unconditional income must be embedded in a concept of care to shift our perspectives away from profit maximisation towards the essentials of life (Winker 2016). She makes a claim for shorter working hours, better provision of care, and better work conditions for care workers so that everybody profits from the new 'time wealth' that can be spent on other activities important to them. Feminist-Marxist philosopher Frigga Haug frames this in her 4-to-1-perspective, where people's time is split into four main activities: employment, reproductive work, our own development, and politics: "linking up those four dimensions of human life to create an alternative model outlines a more comprehensive definition of justice for all" (2015, 359). Haug calls this a "human arrangement of time for executing the necessary, taking care of life and its conditions; to further every person's individual development and the necessary leisure time for political engagement and the construction of society, so that changing oneself and changing society coincide." (Ibid, 361)

Through conversations I had with activists who try to live with less or even no money at all, where possible, there seems to be a general consensus that the unconditional income is rather an emancipatory step towards a different way of organising our economy rather than a final solution. But whatever comes next, as participants from the German crowdfunding project and Meera Zaremba noted: it would entirely change the way we relate to each other and induce social practices that are based on solidarity and care as a necessary basis for commoning practices, as Federici pointed out so rightly.

6. Conclusion:

"(...) commons are not the practices by which we share in an egalitarian manner the resources we produce, but a commitment to the creation of a collective or multiple collective subjects, a commitment to the fostering of the common interest in every aspect of our life and political work, and a commitment therefore to the rejection of all hierarchies and inequalities, and all principles of 'othering' and exclusion." (Federici & Caffentzis 2014, 13)

"The question of the commons is also at the heart of current discussions on democracy." (Petrescu 2010)

This paper started out with the question of what economic frameworks would enable people to re-appropriate the economy to enable and advance broad civic engagement for a more just and sustainable future. I see the four different frameworks this paper explored more deeply – commons, ecommony, community economies, and the unconditional income –, as first emancipatory steps in the right direction. A feminist perspective from beyond centred around the aspect of care is essential in all of these frameworks in order to acknowledge our mutual dependencies and liberate ourselves from the individualist mantra that our current economic system promotes. To sum up the most important aspects from the four frameworks:

- 1. Commons are not necessarily about material resources, but essentially about social practices and relations.*
- 2. Much of the work today is based on the exploitation of others. By providing better conditions and*

by acknowledging reproductive activities, we can make the 'private political' for all. Production must be based on commons and produce commons.

3. The economy is already diverse and in a constant process of becoming. Community is a possible outcome, not the basis. Therefore, we need to reconstruct our relationships if we want to build an alternative to capitalism. We are no autonomous objects, but collective subjects dependent of each other.

4. Work must be motivated intrinsically rather than by existential fear with secured access to resources. An unconditional income could provide the structural framework to make this change possible.

5. Care needs to be at the core of building a new economy to move away from patriarchal and hegemonic structures still present in our inner and outer structures to avoid reproducing and re-enforcing existing conditions. Care plays a crucial role in shaping a relational basis for commoning practices. It is a social practice able to improve our democracies, when contributing to society becomes implicit rather than a duty. It can become an entry point for civic responsibility and active citizenship, a 'caring democracy', to speak in Tronto's words (2013).

All of these frameworks work in relation to each other, they are complementary and for sure there are many others. In an event called 'Post-Money Utopias', activist Lino Zeddies presented a three-stage model towards a 'utopian money system' including a money reform, the introduction of a universal basic income and a change of consciousness in the transition to a commons and gift economy. Participants from the audience proposed a complementary view on all of the three stages rather than putting them in any specific order with all of the activities happening at the same time. There seems to be a common understanding between the different groups that the multiple different approaches complement each other and that the single right solution superior to others does not exist. What is important is to start experimenting, without knowing the exact answer where it might lead us. This requires courage, but what is the risk? In an interview about the unconditional income, economist-philosopher Philip Kovec counters when being taunted "it's like Columbus – who takes off without knowing where he's going to": "And what did he discover? America! (...) Shall we stay home or discover America?"²²

But what does all this mean for designing for the commons from a design activist (and citizen) perspective? In order to answer this question, I take inspiration from Petrescu's approach of 'designing agencies' through urban infrastructures:

"We qualify our projects as 'relational' because they create connectivity: they stimulate desire and pleasure but also prompt political and civic responsibility on the local level, giving collectives of local residents the possibility of appropriating space in the city through daily activities (say, gardening, cooking, games or DIY). Rather than objects, we design agencies." (Petrescu 2010)

This approach acknowledges that everyone is equipped with different levels of agency to self-organise, negotiate public space, and take over civic responsibility, and provides the necessary spaces to enable these transformative processes through experiential learning. Petrescu stresses the need for "new categories and new institutions, new forms of management and governance, and new spaces and actors – an entire infrastructure that is both material and virtual." According to her, the process of setting up this infrastructure is relational: it is about the "creation of connections and links, a networking of ideas, tools and subjectivities.(...) The reinvention of the commons needs space and time for sharing,

²² In: Psychologie Heute, 06/2017. "Das Grundeinkommen ist kein Lottogewinn." (*The basic income is not about winning the lottery.*)

it needs continual and sustained ‘commoning’ – social processes to maintain and reproduce the commons.” (Ibid 2010). Architects, designers, activists, commoners, citizen – this challenge is up to all of us!

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