

Andreas Weber

# **Life, Meaning and Spirituality in the Commons: Towards a Cultural Paradigm Shift**

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**GUASSA COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION  
AREA**



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**WILD ANIMALS HAVE RIGHT OF WAY !**

„If we have have found no real answers for decades,  
we might ask the wrong questions“

## Getting the fundamental questions right

- What is a new **BIOS** for our economic system?
- What is a new understanding of **living** reality?
- What is **life** and our role in the **BIOS**phere?

# Enlivenment

- reconsider „life“ and „aliveness“ as fundamental categories of thought and action
- we are living, feeling beings with meaningful experiences in a community with other living beings
- Enlivenment is more than sustainability
- Householding as nourishing *meaningful* relationships
- Enlivenment = Enlightenment 2.0

## **The current „metaphysics of death“**

- multidimensional dilemmas of today (ecological, social, psychological): crisis in global sensemaking
- progress and knowledge only by reducing everything to algorithms and mechanisms of dead matter
- denial of the world's deeply creative and expressive processes that bring forth a multitude of relationships

# A Silent Universe

<b>„Enlightenment Economy“</b>	<b>Enlightenment core values</b>
ressource / society dualism	mind / body dualism
„homo oeconomicus“	rational agent
material progress	scientific progress
earth = ressource	body = machine
„exchange value“ money	neutral scientific knowledge
market	pitiless nature
consumer / market	citizen / state
market / economics	practice / theory
external, eternal laws	
mechanical cosmos, value-free	

## **Our invisible Problem: „Bioeconomics“**

- evolutionary biology and neoliberal economy are intertwined coherent patterns of our official and unconscious understanding of reality
- bioeconomic core values: efficiency, competition, machine-like egoistical agents
- reflection of victorian society values (struggle, scarcity, no-cooperation, no-care) in „latent metaphysics“
- colonialization of the soul



# The Grand Delusion

## Cognitive Capitalism / Emotional Capitalism

Enclosing the „Five Freedoms“ of embodied personhood:

- to see and hear what is here, instead of what should be, was, or will be
- to say what you think, instead of what you should
- to feel what you feel, instead of what you ought
- to ask for what you want, instead of always waiting for permission
- to take risks in your own behalf, instead of choosing to be only "secure" and not rocking the boat (Virginia Satir)

# The Emperor's New Clothes



## Beyond Bioeconomics

- nature is *not* efficient
- nature does *not* grow in material terms
- nature does *not* create through competition
- nature does *not* produce diversity by scarcity
- nature does *not* know linear progress
- nature does *not* know property

## „Biopoetics“

- new empirical-subjective biology
- organisms as sentient, producing meaning as subjective experience
- reality is alive: subjective experience and feeling are the prerequisites of any rationality
- natural history of freedom, autonomy, agency, value
- nature is gift-economy based on sharing and a continuous deepening of felt meaning

# Natural Anticapitalism: The Biosphere as Commons

- ecology: household of subjects continuously mediating relationships between one another
- two sides of relationships: material, supply aspect & meaning aspect, both interwoven
- no exclusion of agents from habitat (nature/culture style): living individuals *are* the ecosystem
- material exchange processes as flip side of meaningful relationships

# Ecological Commoning 101

- general principles, local rules
- interbeing: balance of individuality and the whole
- non-dualism (no commons without commoners)
- growth of diversity and meaning, not throughput
- negotiation of competition and co-operation
- opening space for „surplus of meaning“ (Varela) and culture of life – „manner, style, and grace“ (Snyder)

# Commons principles as life principles

1 *no commons without commoners*

an ecosystem IS its very inhabitants

2 *every commons is a knowledge commons*

biology is a (bio-)semiotic process (DNA, evo-devo, metabolism, meaning, gesture, ethology, metaphor)

2a *every commons is a material commons*

3 *every commons needs protection*

compartmentation (skin, membranes, cell walls, integuments, species boundaries, mating behaviour)

4 *commons do not scale up but crystallize*

self-organization (autocatalysis, metabiome)

# Commons Creating Peer *Ecology*

CCPE	<i>CCPE</i> <sub>2</sub>
use value trumps exchange value	mostly use value in nature  but there is also exchange value, related to social emotions (status)
indirect reciprocity	everyone is food for others
self organization and self healing	self-organization, self-production, self-repair
knowledge sharing	DNA is open source
community protection	pack rituals, cell recognition
iteration	evolution, natural history, personal life history



## **A compass for the commons: „Feeling alive“**

- enlivenment is an emerging reality in countless corners of the earth
- commons-based initiatives: enacting enlivenment (blending the interests of individual & whole, of meaning & material production and exchange)
- being an active participant in the biosphere: enact freedom within the constraints of existential and ecological necessity
- Patterns of meaningful aliveness dissolve separation of practice and theory

## **A new outlook on reality: Towards „poetic objectivity“**

- generate a larger encompassing framework of a „Commons metaphysics“
- culture of poetic precision: be observant of felt life while accepting the material processes in the world
- „thinking like a mountain“ – sharing our „conditio vitae“

# „Does it enhance life?“ „Does it make life fuller?“

## Commoning as First-Person-Science

Third-Person-Science	First-Person-Science
identities	relationships
empiricism / abstraction	poetic objectivity
irrelevant private „feels“	empirical subjectivity
exchange as neutral supply	exchange as meaningful relation
separation	separation-and-union
outside / inside	outside as inside
abstract description	feeling alive as reality
system constraints	human needs
competing in scarcity	sharing gifts in plenitude

# Towards a meaningful Practice of Thinking/Acting

identities <b>and</b> relationships
poetic objectivity <b>and</b> empirical subjectivity
exchange as material <b>and</b> meaningful relation
separation <b>and</b> union
outside as inside <b>and</b> inside as outside
description <b>and</b> feeling alive as reality
system constraints <b>and</b> human needs
competing in scarcity <b>and</b> sharing gifts in plenitude

# Towards Justice

Is a full life a good life?

Becoming a person

6 principles of CCPE2

6 principles of becoming a person

love as realization of balance-as-imbalancedness

## Embracing imperfection

1st law of thermodynamics: *You can't win.*

2nd law of thermodynamics: *You can't break even.*

3rd law of thermodynamics: *You can't get out of the game.*

4th law of thermodynamics: *You can't change the rules of the game.*

## Post-global Poetics

- embrace paradoxes and contradictions
- enact relationships, do not fix identities
- accept death as creative force of life
- sustainability is a poetic process
- the world has always a meaning dimension

## Commoning as Enacting the Sacred

- **become** human by that which is emphatically the other: interbeing with other living beings, human, non-human, rivers, mountains and trees
- **celebrate** material, social and emotinal relationing as life-giving processes and as essence of existing
- **partake** in the process of living creation and experiene its meaning in a meta-rational manner
- **play** by creating free solutions for necessary constraints and by interpreting material settings according to existential-poetical values



Thank you!

VOLUME 31

# Enlivenment

Towards a fundamental shift in the concepts of nature,  
culture and politics

By **Andreas Weber**



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## Enlivenment.

### Towards a fundamental shift in the concepts of nature, culture and politics.

Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

People often call for "changing the system" and seek to reform the "free market" approach that turns everything, including life itself, into a commodity. But it is impossible to alter our prevailing "operating system" for economics, politics and culture if the underlying "bios" – our unexamined, foundational assumptions about reality – remain the same. And that is

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG  
ECOLOGY



literally our biggest problem today: our understanding of "bios" -- the nature of life itself -- is wrong. Our civilisation operates as if reality is all about organising inert, dead matter in more efficient ways. This is the heritage of the Enlightenment, which claims that physical bodies are entirely separate from immaterial minds. Once this assumption is made, no serious systemic change is really possible, as much as we might try. This viewpoint has profound implications for what we call "environmental protection."

To suggest a more promising, alternative future, this essay proposes a new paradigm of "bios" called "Enlivenment." Based on recent research findings in the biological sciences, the idea of Enlivenment explains how nature -- and our role in it -- is irrefutably individualistic, cooperative, and centered on experiences and meaning. The world is not simply an elaborate machine driven by impersonal

macro-forces. It is *alive!* From an Enlivenment perspective, nature itself is a living commons. The biosphere is not just about various forms of competition, but equally about the commoning activities of a myriad of individual agents living in an ecosystem. This new perspective can help us realize that only an "enlivened" economy will be truly sustainable. Humans and the more-than-human world must realize that they both must struggle, always, to achieve a fuller aliveness. --Andreas Weber

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[frankandreasweber@gmx.de](mailto:frankandreasweber@gmx.de)