

Generalized agency and commonism

Denis Neumüller and Stefan Meretz

Abstract

In German Critical Psychology the category pair of restrictive vs. generalized agency is key. While restrictive agency as acting by accepting given societal conditions is well elaborated the counter-notion of generalized agency remains rather vague. In this paper we challenge the prevailing understanding of the concept of generalized agency. First, we critically examine class theory as the theoretical basis of the concept of generalized agency. We question the notion of extended control over one's living conditions as the main criterion for the question of how actions can be grounded in a generalized way. Instead we suggest that a notion of sublated capitalism is needed in order to gain a directional determination of generalizable agency. Based on the concept of societal nature of humans and a renewed critique of capitalism, we outline basic determinations of a post-capitalist mode of production. This society – we call it commonism – is structured by general relations of inclusion having the commons (instead of the commodity) as the elementary form of societal reproduction, and a societal mediation in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. Finally, we suggest that a notion of general agency unfolded under such conditions can serve as a directional determination of generalizable agency today.

Keywords

generalized agency, extended control, Marxism, commons, commonism, inclusion

This contribution is the product of a process of joint self-understanding by the authors about their unease with the concept of generalized agency as it is currently used in Critical Psychology. We do not perceive this process as complete; instead we hope that our contribution stimulates a discussion about this concept and the categorial foundations of Critical Psychology as a whole.

First, we would like to explain why the prevailing version of the concept of generalized agency in the book *Foundations of Psychology (Grundlegung der Psychologie, Holzkamp 1983, hereinafter: GdP)* and other critical-psychological literature seems contradictory to us. On this basis, we argue that this

contradictory version can only be resolved by gaining a concept of *sublated*¹ capitalism – we use the concept ‘commonism’ for this notion.

From “dual possibility” to “generalized/restrictive agency”

The category of agency is viewed as the “central concept” (Markard 2009, p. 166)² of Critical Psychology. It serves to make the mediation between individual life activity and societal³ process understandable. For the individual, this mediation is represented by a relationship between possibilities and restrictions for action. Human agency, in this sense, is conceived of as “the exercise of control⁴ by the individual over his or her own requirements of life through participation in the control of the societal process” (GdP, p. 241). The ability to exercise control over one’s own living conditions thus concerns both control over the possibility of satisfying one’s own needs *under* the given societal conditions and control *over* the very conditions under which the satisfaction of needs takes place. People themselves create the conditions under which they act in a societal context. This gives them the opportunity not only to accept the given framework, but also to change it in order to overcome restrictions. According to Holzkamp this „dual possibility“ (GdP, p. 354) represents a general definition of societal individuals, i.e. it applies to all societal formations.

In capitalism, the relationship between individual life process and societal reproduction process takes on a specific contradictory form. Under capitalist constellations of meaning with their corresponding structures of action, people not only develop reasons “to change the respective circumstances according to their life interests, but also reasons to arrange themselves with the given possibilities, namely whenever the risk of conflict with the authorities makes a

¹ We use the Hegelian term sublation (*Aufhebung*) to grasp the three moments of transformation: 1. to do away with, abolish, cancel out; 2. to keep or preserve; 3. to lift or raise up.

² All German quotations were translated by the authors.

³ We use the word *societal* instead of *social* when referring to the German word *gesellschaftlich*. The distinction between aspects on the level of society and aspects on the level of social interaction is central for Critical Psychology. See Tolman (1994, pp. 37-38) for a comprehensive explanation.

⁴ There is a bigger translation problem: in accordance with the translations of critical-psychological articles that exist so far, we use ‘control over’ for the German word “*Verfügung über*”, which – as Tolman (1994, p. 150) notes – “literally means ‘disposal over’, which approximates the sense of ‘subject to one’s disposal’. None of the ordinary dictionary meanings of ‘disposal’, however, quite captures the Critical Psychological intent.” What is meant is participation in collective decision making processes and access to and cooperative use of resources and means of production, which are both necessary for each individual’s own life conditions and conduct of everyday life.

changing intervention appear too great and dangerous” (Holzkamp 1992, p. 66). The attempt to secure one’s agency within the given framework then leads one “to participate in the perpetuation of the circumstances through which this [one’s agency] is threatened” (GdP, p. 378). This aspect of individuals’ efforts to exercise control over their living conditions is what Holzkamp calls the *restrictive* alternative of agency. Holzkamp then speaks of an “arrangement with the rulers” that serves “to pass on the suppression from ‘above’ in various ways to those ‘below’ to whose expense one’s own partial interests are to be enforced” (GdP, p. 375). The counterterm that characterizes the “second possibility” (GdP, p. 355) – the change in conditions with the perspective of realizing long-term or generalized opportunities for life and development – is *generalized agency*.

The categorial pair of restrictive and generalized agency does not serve to classify persons or actions as restrictive or generalized. It is supposed to further the understanding of the restrictive and generalized aspects of one’s actions and thus to identify existing possibilities and limitations for action in one’s life situation, or as Markard (2009) writes: “it allows for the insistence on the question of how, when, why, under which circumstances I simultaneously hurt my own and others' life interests in attempts to cope with my own life” (p.200).

This version of the categorial pair of restrictive-generalized agency incorporates social-theoretical analyses of capitalism. Here, Holzkamp refers to Karl Marx’s critique of political economy as it was read in the 1970/80s by those schools of thought that were oriented towards actually existing socialism. After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, this reading was extended by some authors (e.g. by analyses of neoliberalism, cf. Kaindl 1998, 2008), but also criticized and declared invalid (Baller 1995). We would like to add to this discussion a third, constructive criticism of the traditional interpretation of Marxism and show that it can help resolve categorial ambiguities.

In contrast to Kaindl (1998, p. 28), we do not see the “general structural concepts” on which Holzkamp bases his reception of Marxist social theory as the only “basis for Marxist theorizing and debate” that are “largely shared”. We oppose the idea of a *single* generally evident “Marxist framework theory” as Kaindl argues following Haug (1998, p.375). Instead, we argue that there are *various* framework theories within the reception of Marx’s critique of political economy, which understand those general structural concepts or their significance and meaning in different ways. In contrast to Baller (ibid.), we do not think that the reference to Marx’s theory has become obsolete due to historical changes. Rather, we consider it worth including newer approaches to Marx reception (cf. Postone 1993, Heinrich 2012, Larsen et al. 2014), which refer to precisely these “general structural concepts”. We think this might be crucial both for the (singular theoretical) understanding of current inner capitalist

changes (e.g. the rise of neoliberalism) and for the formation of individual and subject-scientific categories. Thus, we do not turn away from the critical-psychological basis of Marx' theory, for example in favor of postmodern approaches. We try to develop a position on a dialectical-materialistic basis that goes beyond the limitations of traditional interpretation and allows a more appropriate determination of the critical-psychological categories (in this paper with a focus on the category of generalized agency).

Class theory as the present theoretical basis of generalized agency

Traditional Marxist social theory assumes a basic division of society into classes. The main antagonistic proponents in this conception are labor and capital. The class positions result from their relation to the means of production: The capital class controls them, while the property-less labor class is forced to sell its labor, which in turn can be bought, utilized and exploited by the capital class.⁵ Critical-psychological texts, with references to social theory, therefore often use shortened terms like “the exploiters” and “the exploited” or “the rulers” and “the ruled” (H.-Osterkamp 1976, GdP, Kaindl 1998, Markard 2009). The perspective of transformation consists in the conquest of control over the means of production (“expropriation of the expropriators”) and state power by the exploited in order to build a socialist society. This strategy gains legitimacy from the configuration of interests. While the capital class only follows its partial interest of valorization and exploitation, the historical task of the labor class is the enforcement of general human interests. In this theoretical arrangement, therefore, the orientation “towards the enforcement of general interests in joint control over one’s own living conditions [stands] against the prevailing partial interests in restricting this control” (GdP, p. 373), the striving for the realization of general interests by the dominated (labor class and allies) stands against the currently effective partial interests of the ruling class (capital class and allies).

Under capitalist conditions, it is important to counter the economic power of the capital class through political unification. Each piece of counter-power achieved by the dominated expands their possibilities for action and (potentially) quality of life by pushing back the power and possibilities for action of the ruling class. This leads to a particular conception of the category of generalized agency. It comprises the successively extended control of the dominated over the

⁵ We use the terms “capital class” and “labor class” instead of “capitalist class” and “working class”. We prefer this categorial rather than the sociological designation of the respective groups of individuals subsumed under these categories (cf. Kurz/Lohoff 1989).

conditions of action with the perspective of collective control over all societal living conditions in socialism. In this theoretical arrangement, the quest for extended control, especially when it takes place through a “cooperative alliance of individuals at the interpersonal level” (GdP, p. 331) in organizations of the dominated, is the sufficient criterion for generalized agency. The category does not have to be further qualified in terms of content; the extension of control plus organized counter-force (that has to be concretized in each particular empirical constellation) are sufficient for defining the right direction (cf. e.g. Holzkamp 1980).

This notion is contrasted with the category of restrictive agency. It comprises actions of the dominated within given limits under acceptance of existing conditions. Like the action of the capital class, it too remains in the mode of partial interests at the expense of other partial interests. The difference between objective general interest and subjectively realized partial interests of the dominated is bridged by the figure of the “arrangement with the rulers”. Instead of exposing myself to the risk of losing opportunities for action in the event of failing attempts to expand my disposition power at the expense of the rulers, I try to “arrange with the rulers... [and] participate in their power to secure/expand my own capacity to act at the expense of others’ interests..., whereby the suppression from ‘above’ is passed on in various ways to those ‘below’ to whose expense ones own partial interests are to be enforced” (GdP, p. 375).

If we criticize class theory, it is not because we deny the existence of classes. On the contrary, we think, the problem is different: By privileging class antagonism as the supposedly main contradiction, the significance of other relations of domination is devalued. In the 1970/80s, socialist feminists demanded to end the treatment of patriarchy as a side contradiction and to recognize it on an equal footing with class rule. At the end of the 1980s, Triple Oppression Theory went one step further and declared classism, patriarchy and racism to be equal relationships of domination, which would have to be overcome in the same way. From the 1990s onward, numerous groups affected by specific power relations empowered themselves to address their particular experiences of oppression (cf. Habermann 2008). Numerous other dimensions of domination have been highlighted and have entered the realm of the speakable: sexuality, desire, color, relationship forms, body, language, physical appearance, education, age, etc. – an inexhaustible list. Intersectionality research was established in the 2000s with the aim of investigating the interaction of different forms of domination. The concern of making the particular visible has been put forward by poststructuralist theoretical approaches, especially in the academic field. Authors of these approaches explicitly distance themselves from unifying

“grand theories”.⁶ In this view, Critical Psychology is a grand theory of the old style.

We share the criticism of the privileged treatment of class contradiction⁷, while at the same time adhering to a “grand theoretical claim”: the world as a coherent whole can in principle be depicted with a theory that is consistent in itself. However, such a uniform insight is not a final state to be achieved, but a continuous process of approximation. Based primarily on readings of Marx’s theory that put the fetishism of societal relations at the core, we come to other conceptual definitions of the essential contradictions in capitalism and the corresponding consequences for a concept of transformation that *sublates* capitalism. We claim that this has consequences for the content of Critical Psychology’s categories. In line with Holzkamp’s approach to concept development, this alternative definition at the level of societal theory has to be elaborated in terms of meanings and forms of thought. We can only indicate this in this article. Further analyses and explanations are required which go beyond the scope of this article (cf. Meretz 2012, pp. 69-62 and 95-98).

We consider the criticism of the multiple manifestations of domination, to which ever new groups and individuals are subject, to be essential for an updated critical-psychological theory formation. At the same time, there is currently no analytical approach available that can identify and theorize the common roots of the diversity of the domination dimensions.⁸ We outline such an approach in the remainder of this article.

Capitalism as a system of general relations of exclusion

Separated private production based on the institution of property forces an ex-post mediation via the market where commodities are exchanged. Marx calls the commodity the “elementary form” (Marx 1890/1990, p. 125) of this way of societal production. Commodities are produced privately by distinct entities. The dimensions of utility (“use value”) and mediation (“exchange value”) are in contrast to each other. In production and consumption, the sensual (material and immaterial) character of the commodity to satisfy needs is the central focus; in mediation, only the socially valid production effort counts that determines the

⁶ With the *New Materialism* approach, there is again a counter-trend within poststructuralist theory formation (cf. Coole and Frost 2010).

⁷ The position of class contradiction in traditional Marxist theory is categorially derived from the analysis of production conditions. An immanent criticism would have to start at this level. We cannot do this here, but refer to the newer approaches of Marx reception already mentioned above.

⁸ Assumed that individualizing unconnected explanations are not adequate.

equivalent exchange. This means that the so-called sensual-vital and the mediation-related productive aspects of control over need satisfaction (GdP, p. 242) also tend to be separated and appear as opposites. In a commodity society, for example, the obvious focus of satisfying needs is on consumption, while the productive aspect of work appears only as a means of earning money.⁹

In the process of valorization, the contrast between the utility and the mediation of a commodity undergoes numerous “changes of form” (Marx 1890/1990, p. 200), but never dissolves. The “metamorphosis of commodities through which the social metabolism is mediated” (ibid, p. 199) creates a fundamental *societal logic of separation* through the contrariness in its changes of form. This logic arises because mediation determines the societal metabolism, while utility is subordinate to it. Thus the (surplus) value is the purpose, the utility value the means; the profit the purpose, the production the means. In the context of the societal provision of living conditions, the relationship is exactly the opposite, utility is the purpose, mediation the means. The perverted metamorphosis movement becomes problematic because the value that sets the purpose becomes an endless feedback loop in itself: “It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject” (ibid., p. 255). Marx (ibid.) describes the consequence for people as follows: “Their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them.” (p. 167f). Marx calls this perverted and autonomized movement the “fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities” (ibid., p. 165). The resulting and perpetuating societal logic of separation now has two dimensions, a material and a social one.

The material dimension of the societal separation is the *logic of externalization*. Since, in order to be competitive, a commodity has to be produced at no more than average effort, other cost-increasing production aspects are outsourced and harmful consequences of cheapened production are imposed on third parties. This means, however, that commodities are permanently produced for sale and eventually for the satisfaction of certain needs, while, at the same time, this very production restricts and violates other needs. Externalization means destruction of ecosystems and global climate, degradation of resources, harmful working conditions, questionable product quality etc. Although these consequences can be limited by government regulations, they can

⁹ Work can be *fun* as much as consumption, but often *fun* refers only to the operative subaspect of actions, since the aspect of determining the overriding goals of action is usually not available (cf. GdP, p. 279ff).

never be eliminated entirely, let alone reversed into permanently positive externalities.

The social dimension of the movement of societal separation is the *logic of exclusion*.¹⁰ It is a social logic of the permanent opposition of interests, as a structural relationship in which “I can only extend control of my living conditions *at the expense of others*” (GdP, p. 374). This also includes the aspect of “self-hostility” (GdP, pp. 376-382). The logic of exclusion is always a *dynamic relationship of real inclusions and exclusions*. Inclusions based on partial interests are certainly a means of increasing the ability to exclude third parties. The logic of interests and the logic of exclusion are closely linked.¹¹ It is important to understand that the logic of exclusion is not a relationship of intention but a structural relationship that arises from the commodity form.

We see the societal logic of separation with the two dimensions of externalization and logic of exclusion as a *system of general relations of exclusion*. In this way, society disintegrates into partial interests, and particular domination embodies its central dynamic. Domination is therefore *not an external relationship* with clearly assigned positions of rulers and dominated (for example as the dominance of capital, with which one can “arrange” oneself), but *an inner relationship* that goes through us and which we reproduce daily. This is in line with Holzkamps notion of power in his book *Lernen (Learning)*: following Foucault, he claims “the ‘obsolescence’ of a ‘power of the sovereign’ through the modern ‘power economy’, which works through those affected, and in which everyone is in a certain sense simultaneously perpetrator and victim” (1993, p. 535). It is obvious that power and influence can be distributed very unequally. Nevertheless, the logic of exclusion inherent in the commodity form and secured by the institution of property cannot be overcome along individual exclusion dimensions. It can only be sublated by *sublating the social forms of “commodity” and “property”* in the production of overall living conditions. This, in turn, can only be achieved through the implementation of a new mode of reproduction (see below, see also Meretz 2015, 2017).

Now it also becomes clear why the criterion of an extension of control does not suffice to determine the direction of generalized agency. Under conditions of the logic of exclusion, extensions of control of some are *necessarily* (because structurally mediated) at the expense of others. Rather, the question is whether it will remain like this or whether there is also a moment that transcends these exclusionary conditions.

¹⁰ A fundamental separation we cannot go into here is the separation of the spheres into a realm of valorization and the public with “male connotations” and a realm of reproduction and the private with “female connotations” (cf. Scholz 2014).

¹¹ There can be no general interests within the logic of exclusion. The enforcement of general interests is identical to the abolition of the logic of interests in general.

The problem of “extended agency”

The combination of generalized agency with extended control has led to a notion of an “extended agency” (*erweiterte Handlungsfähigkeit*) (Büsse 2011, Nowak et al. 2012, Kierstein 2013, but also GdP, p. 371). Although this reformulation has rightly been criticized time and again (e.g. Markard 2013), it contains a true core: it indirectly refers to the problem that the *extension of control with respect to dispositive power does not necessarily have to be of a generalizable nature*. In everyday practice, it might be helpful for overcoming or resolving problematic situations by discovering new possibilities for action by means of extended control over one’s conditions. However, the emancipatory content of the analysis of such situations is in danger of getting lost with a reduced category of “extended” agency. In fact, extended control over the conditions of action has a *restrictive* moment, when it is at the expense of others in the mode of partial interests and thus reproduces general conditions of exclusion. It has a transcending, thus *generalizing* moment, when it strives for general conditions of inclusion in which one’s own development is the condition for the development of others and vice versa. This gives rise to two points of criticism for us. Firstly, the extension of control – since its content is undetermined – is insufficient as a “directional determination” (Holzkamp 1984/1991, p.60) of generalized agency. Secondly, we also wonder whether extending the scope of control is not a *general aspect* of agency, i.e. it should not be associated only with generalization. We now turn to the first point and discuss the second point in the summary section at the end of the article.

Klaus Holzkamp did not make a clear statement on the issue of extended control. There are only a few passages in which he writes about *extending* control in the context of *restrictive* agency (GdP p. 202, 376; 1984/1991, p. 37), which are then ultimately always connected with the aforementioned arrangement with the rulers. Generally, Holzkamp conceives of “‘generalized agency’ as a ‘joint extension of societal living possibilities’” (GdP, 2). Markard (2010) also states: “Terminologically, ‘extending’ stands for non-restrictive” (p. 6).

If “extended control” is not sufficient as a criterion for determining the direction of the category of generalized agency, how then can the direction be determined? So far, there have only been a few comments on the direction. One example is Kaindl (1996), who states “‘Generalized agency’ ... describes the insistence on the question of humane conditions that do not continually disavow human possibilities. They find their empirical counterpart at best in emancipatory tendency... Only from the standpoint of ‘reasonable’ utopia – i.e. from the standpoint of insisting on fundamental criticism of society – it is possible to criticize unreasonable and inhuman conditions as such and to grasp the disavowal

of human possibilities as such disavowal” (p. 106). Kaindl (ibid.) uses the concept of *reason* to criticize capitalism as “unreasonable” and “inhuman” and calls for a “reasonable utopia” (ibid.). Such a utopia would be based on a “fundamental criticism” (ibid.) of capitalism in order to recognize the (practical) denial of human possibilities. This is an understandable approach; however, it retains a simple negation. The concept of reason, however is capable of going beyond the limits. In G.W.F. Hegel’s work, reasonable thought means sublative thought in the sense of a double negation. A “reasonable utopia” is a theory that outlines societal conditions that must be created so that human possibilities can be recognized as constitutive and are able to unfold in an unrestricted way. If such conditions are conceptually developed, there is also an objective that can be used to determine a direction. Only under these conditions can an “extended control” be qualified in such a way that restrictive and generalizable moments of agency in the sense described above become apparent.

Consequently, we are concerned with the question of how the generalization of actions can be appropriately determined categorially, or, as Markard (2006) puts it, “in relation to the objective of societal emancipation ...how actions ... can be grounded in a generalizable way” (p.107).

The problem of utopian theory building

With the call for a reasonable utopia that conceptually sublates capitalism, we are tackling a *taboo* of left-wing theory that was erected after the defeat of real socialism: Nothing can and must be said about a possible future society. It is the prohibition of a utopia as well as of a philosophy of history that realizes this. This is sometimes also referred to as the “*Bilderverbot*” (the ban on images) in reference to monotheistic mythologies. What is meant is the class configuration, in which the labor class has the historical mission to follow the predetermined historical path derived from the development of productive power to liberate humanity. *This* historical-philosophical theory has been practically put out of commission, but historical philosophy as a philosophically based position on history has not.¹² In this text, we propose the development of a categorially founded historical-philosophical position, which shares with the ban on images that there must be no concrete “detailing” (*auspinseln*, “casting a picture of utopia in a positive manner”) (Adorno in Bloch & Adorno 1964/1988, p. 10) of a

¹² In fact, it is impossible to do social theory without a historical-philosophical position, even if it is not explicated. The assumption of a fundamental openness and indeterminacy of future historical development *is* also a historical-philosophical position.

future everyday life¹³. However, we argue that fundamental considerations regarding the mediation between individuals and society of a sublated capitalism are possible. These considerations are based on three sources: (a) determinations of the societal nature of humans; (b) conceptual negation of the capitalist mode of production; (c) categorial determination of post-capitalist, or as we put it, commonist mode of reproduction.

Regarding (a): A concept of the societal nature of humans was developed by Critical Psychology. This term not only determines what societal people *are*, but also defines the space of human-societal development in history. Generally speaking, the development potential is that people can shape their living conditions according to their needs, because with the shift of dominance to societality, “the maintenance of single individuals’ existence has become the consciously aspired goal” (GdP, p. 190), as Holzkamp grasps this potency. Up until now, this potential has always been realized in forms of hierarchies and domination, which, however, meant that the conscious realization of goals of some was always at the expense of other people. However, this limits the development of the genuine potential of humanity as a whole. Only when the “free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx/Engels 1848), i.e. actually all individuals are part of the consciously designed societal way of existence, has the potential been truly exhausted. Part of the concept of societal nature is the potency of *general relations of inclusion*, which is synonymous with the absence of domination and the free development of all people.

Regarding (b): Thus, it now also becomes apparent that general relations of inclusion as the potency of human-societal development are the (double) negation of general relations of exclusion as we analyzed them for capitalism (see above). We argue that there are no privileged dimensions of exclusion in the relations of domination (such as the class division), the abolition of which makes the sublation of capitalism possible. Instead, the overall systemic context and its basic logic of exclusion, which underlies all concrete dimensions of exclusion and phenomena of domination, can only be transformed as a whole. This is synonymous with sublating the capitalist (i.e. commodity-based) mode of production. At the same time, however, this transformation must include the dissociated, non-commodified, areas of reproduction by sublating the division of

¹³ Markard demonstrates this ironically: Critical Psychology would have “designed explicatively how it will look like if people live on a cooperative basis realizing their human specificity of being able to relate to their own needs. Then conditions would be created ‘under which sexual and related needs can be satisfied regularly and appropriately, etc.’... As far as I personally am concerned, I do not have the slightest desire for this cooperative design, including appropriate humping” (Markard 2013; quote from H.-Osterkamp 1976, p. 107).

the spheres as such (cf. Scholz 2014). It is therefore not just a question of a different economy, but of a fundamentally different – inclusionary - way of societal provision of living conditions in a broad sense.

Regarding (c): However, the insights from (a) and (b) do not yet determine *what* this new generalized societal provision, in short: the new mode of reproduction, looks like. Above all, it is still to be developed which forms of societal mediation suggest rationalities of action that make actions in accordance with the general structures of inclusion subjectively functional. To roughly sketch this on a categorial level remains the task of the last part of this text. Without further proof, the following statements are based on the consideration that the commons in commonism – analogous to the commodity in capitalism – represent the basic element-system relationship of this new mode of reproduction (cf. Meretz 2017, Sutterlütli and Meretz 2018).

Excursus: Commons

In order to illustrate what we will talk about in the following, we will add a phenographic excursion (cf. Holzkamp 1973, pp. 21-22) on the functioning of commons, which we have gained from existing practical examples. We abstract from all empirically existing aspects which – according to our analysis – are owed to the capitalist framework and fictitiously place these commons in a commons-friendly environment (which is not the case in capitalism). This illustration cannot replace the following categorial analysis, but is intended to provide a descriptive approach to the subject for those people who have not yet had any experience with and in commons contexts and therefore do not know or suspect “what is to be discussed” (ibid.).

Commons are “resources (code, knowledge, food, energy sources, water, land, time, etc.) resulting from self-organized processes of common need-oriented production, administration, maintenance and/or use (commoning)” (de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commons, accessed on 13.11.2017). People with similar goals come together to plan, organize and execute a re-/productive process. They use resources in the broad sense described in the quotation, i.e. natural assets or (preliminary) products of a material, immaterial or social nature. On the surface, such a “project” can certainly be compared to a “company” in the functional structure of capitalism. However, the purpose, organization and control over processes and products differ greatly.

The *purpose* of a commons is to satisfy the needs of both those directly involved and, through the societal organization, those who benefit from the results. For those directly involved, the focus of their activities is on satisfying

the productive aspect of needs.¹⁴ In this way, they develop their agency by participating in the societal creation of living conditions. The results are in general freely accessible to the users. The *organization* of activities is carried out by the participants themselves, i.e. it is self-organization in a comprehensive sense. They determine the rules of cooperation, determine their decision-making procedures and settle conflicts. An important prerequisite for self-organization is *control* over the conditions of cooperation, essentially including control over the resources required to meet the purpose. Since the means of power are not available to force individuals to take part in activities, the conditions for participation are usually designed in a welcoming manner. Only then will an individual premise structure develop that makes participation probable for good individual reasons. However, this participation is indispensable in order to achieve the commons' goals. In commons, it is therefore subjectively functional to make the needs of others the premises of one's own actions and to solve conflicts communicatively.

In the following section we develop categorial definitions of commons, which – in contrast to capitalist relations – are in a positive generative relation to a commons society (commonism).

Commonism as a system of general relations of inclusion

On the basis of anthropological, historical and contemporary empirical studies, the *commons* can be determined as an elementary form of a new way of societal reproduction (the following is only a condensed outline, for details see Meretz 2017, 2018, Sutterlütli and Meretz 2018). *Commonism* would therefore be the society in which commons are the elementary form of societal reproduction; they produce and are produced by commonism.¹⁵

The dimensions of usefulness and mediation can also be distinguished in a commons, but they do not contradict each other and are connected. This basically sets them apart from the commodity form (see above). The usefulness and mediation are both expressed in the sensual (material, immaterial and societal)

¹⁴ This is a prospective assumption. With current commons, the sensual-vital need aspect often outweighs the productive one. The dominance of *direct* cooperation is based on the niche character of the projects.

¹⁵ It must be taken into account that the previously quoted Wikipedia definition refers to today's conditions in which commons, according to our assumption, have the character of an embryonic-form but not of an elementary-form. That is because the systemic level corresponding to the elementary form and thus the reciprocal generative connection is "missing" (cf. Meretz 2014).

character of the product.¹⁶ Thus, both in respect to the sensual-vital aspect of usefulness and to the productive aspect of control over living conditions and mediation, there is a direct connection to needs. In commons, the needs-based mediation does not take place *ex post* (i.e. retrospectively) as is usually the case with commodities, but before production, i.e. *ex ante*. Before the production is implemented, the different wishes and requirements as well as the objective and social conditions and priorities – in other words, ultimately the needs – are communicated. This can lead to conflicts of needs, which are now *not* decided by the “power of the factual” at the expense of others (due to a lack of property-based decision-making power), but are (must be) dealt with communicatively. The interpersonal relationships of reciprocity that form in commons are usually *unconditional* (no conditional linking of taking to giving), *peer to peer* and *including*; in critical-psychological terms, they are *intersubjective relationships*. Holzkamp also states that “‘intersubjective’ relationships are decidedly characterizing collective or societal subjectivity” (GdP, p. 373).

The relations of mediation at the interpersonal, directly cooperative level – according to the element-system relationship of commons and commonism – find their counterpart in the transpersonal societal context of cooperation. While market mediation in capitalism is only quantitative, separated from usefulness, via the radically reduced information channel of value (expressed as price) and thus only indirectly referring to singular needs, commons mediation represents needs *directly* and *qualitatively*.

The term *stigmery* is used for informational mediation (cf. Meretz 2015). Locally available information (stigmata = signs) serves the indirect coordination of activities in large social systems. In capitalism, for example, prices have such a stigma function, but the mediation information is merely quantitative¹⁷ and – because of the ex-post character of mediation – only serves for subsequent marketing purposes. Commons mediation, on the other hand, is qualitative, ex-ante and refers primarily to the production of means for need satisfaction. This includes object-related process information (measured values, status signals, tracking data, etc.) that is generated in and with the activity, and meta information that accompanies the activity and serves planning and coordination

¹⁶ In contrast to commodity production, social conditions also belong to the consciously produced “products” that are geared to needs. In the former, these are either subject to the fetishist inversion (i.e. are determined by the factual process of the commodity movement) or are outsourced to the dissociated, immediate personal “private sphere”.

¹⁷ The alleged complexity and information reducing quality of money is often praised, referring to money as a tool for representing qualities in quantitative terms. This actually means that all qualitative dimensions that are not directly related to the product are cut off, or in economic terms: are externalized. However, these externalities are not out of the world, but often occur (in most cases somewhere else on the planet or in the future) as damage and thus restriction of quality of life.

(requirement descriptions, plans, statistics, wish lists, etc.). This qualitative, directly needs-related information arises before or in processes dedicated to creating the material, symbolic and social conditions for the satisfaction of needs.

The social aspect of stigmergy is the *self-selection* of activities, in which the decision-making process is reversed. Instead of assigning activities – that have been chosen hierarchically or consensually – to people who have to carry them out (with more or less external pressure or internal compulsion), people look for and chose activities that are right for them. On the basis of locally available information, which can certainly refer to global phenomena, they select the constellation in which they want to be or become active. Self-selection based on voluntariness is the best prerequisite for truly motivated action that is not thwarted by external constraints (that occur for the purpose of valorization, for example). Thus, not only the separation of decision and execution, which Karl Marx criticized as “the enslaving subordination of individuals to the division of labor” (Marx 1875/1970, p. 11), is sublated, but also the societal division into a public sphere that is value-productive and carries a masculine connotation and a private-reproductive sphere that carries a feminine connotation.

Stigmergy in a commons society can be understood as a form of indirect and emergent self-management of the communicative mediation of needs, resources, limitations and goals. The principle of self-selection at the individual level leads to a similar change of focus at the overall systemic level: Instead of directly organizing the processes by means of central planning, the aim is to create the *conditions for social self-organization*, which then produces the stigmatically distributed planning. The inclusion logic creates the conditions for its own reinforcement: Inclusive actions are subjectively functional and create conditions for further inclusive actions. General relations of inclusion emerge.

With the categorial outline of general relations of inclusion in commonism, we have set the preconditions for discussing the problem of determining the direction of generalized agency. In doing so, we want to take up and answer the postponed question of whether extending control could be better conceived of as a general aspect of agency.

General agency as directional determination

The term “generalized agency” sounds like a state. In the sense of a directional determination, it would be more appropriate to speak of “generalizable agency” in order to grasp the processual character of an orientation towards relations in which agency, the participation in the societal control of living conditions, is no

longer restricted in the form of domination,¹⁸ but has become “general”. At the same time, the character of potentiality is emphasized: the “not yet” free development, can only be the free development of all. The goal of generalizable agency would therefore be *general agency* in conditions in which the potential of human-societal development can fully unfold. In our view, such conditions can only be general relations of inclusion – commonism in our terminology. General agency can therefore be understood as the unrestricted subjective-intersubjective realization of human-societal development potentials. The “double functionality” of ensuring individual existence and societal reproduction is no longer structurally contradictory here (reproduction of the conditions that oppose one’s own living possibilities). Instead, because of the logic of inclusion, individual goals can be realized fully in accordance with societal goals. This means that one can participate in the conscious process of societal provisioning in an unrestricted manner that is appropriate for each. Intersubjectivity is the suggested inclusionary form of relationship that one both needs and realizes when satisfying one’s needs.

The development of a general agency in general relations of inclusion is the sought-after directional determination for the category of generalizable agency. It is about the moments of agency that can potentially be generalized under capitalist conditions and thus point beyond them. Generalizable moments are opposed by restrictive moments in which options for action promise an extended control of conditions for action, but which, at the same time, reproduce exclusionary conditions, i.e. can only be realized at the expense of others. Both moments, the transcending and restrictive, are always in a relationship under capitalist conditions, so they are not types of action, but analytical concepts for reflecting one’s own actions. If we bring together the considerations made here about the prevailing conceptual constellation of restrictive/generalized agency, then “extending control” *no longer* clearly stands for “non-restrictive” (cf. Markard 2010). Rather, the extension of control over conditions is always contradictory: it can coincide with mere restrictive forms of coping under acceptance of dominant societal conditions and the restriction of others; or it can transcend the dominant conditions, be rather generalizable and point to the direction of general relations of inclusion.

However, this would mean that extension of control would be the *general determination of agency* and the complete renunciation of extension a borderline case. In Holzkamp’s words, agency as such is “an analytic category that can help

¹⁸ It is evident that there are other restrictions, such as those imposed by nature (produced, for example, by ecological devastations of capitalism). What is meant here are only the societal restrictions imposed by domination, which can also be transcended societally.

us to understand how the *general directional determination of a tendency toward extended control over one's own life conditions* [emphasis added] through participation in societal provisioning manifests itself – however reduced, perverted, or mystified - under concrete social developmental conditions and obstacles. The surface appearances of individual courses of development that are ordinarily encountered can thus be analyzed in terms of the relationship they express between the generalized action potency and the developmental restrictions through which they are canalized and deformed.” (Holzkamp 1984/1991, pp. 60-61). Thus, extending control determines the direction of agency in general.¹⁹

Holzkamp did not elaborate on the idea of interpreting extended control as a determination of agency in *general* and making the contradictions of extending control analytically accessible. Instead, the adjective “restrictive” usually stands for renunciation of extension and “generalized” for an extension of control over conditions for action. In this respect, it is understandable if recipients are reducing generalized agency to simply an extended one. Nevertheless, there are some passages in which the contrasting juxtaposition of restrictive and extended agency is relinquished. Holzkamp asks: “But how is it possible for individuals to overcome the current limitation/threat in the direction of extending their agency/fulfilment of existence if the alternative of collectively extending their control is abandoned, i.e. within the framework of the existing possibilities for action and power relations?” (GdP, p. 374). Here, collective vs. individual extension of control are contrasted, i.e. different ways of extending control. However, the approach of analyzing the inner contradictions of extending control of agency itself was not pursued further.

With this article we hope to have taken up, carved out and further developed an immanent but hidden intention of Holzkamp's. The consequences for research on psychological practice and on the conduct of everyday life would be the subject of further investigations.

¹⁹ This is also in line with Holzkamp's argument on ontogenesis. For the child growing up, the aim is to reduce fear and dependency by continuously extending his or her agency in the direction of “adult” agency. The fact that the child can choose options of conflict resolution as preforms of restrictive agency in a way that is oriented towards coping and instrumentalizing does not change the purpose of the extension of control. Extending control is an unconditional moment of child development. It is questionable why this should no longer apply to the development of adults.

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Denis Neumüller is concerned with the theory and practice of critical psychology and societal transformation in various contexts such as the Commons Institute and the Collective Self-understanding Network (Netzwerk Kollektive Selbstverständigung).

Stefan Meretz is an engineer and computer scientist, co-founder of the Commons Institute and member of the Collective Self-understanding Network. He recently published the book "Sublating Capitalism. An Invitation to think about utopia and transformation in a new way" together with Simon Sutterlütti.