

Foreword

In his influential book, *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi describes a fundamental *double movement* that has traversed the history of industrial capitalism, which is also referred to as the ‘Lib-Lab’ pendulum. With the global system understood as a combination of a Capital system, a State system, and an ‘Imagined Community’, that is, the Nation, Polanyi showed how phases when the market forces prevailed at the cost of increasing ecological and social instability were alternated with periods where the pendulum swung back and social forces mobilized, driving the state to rein in the free market economy.

It seems quite clear that this mechanism no longer functions as it once did. Despite a massive growth of social movements from the right and the left, social and ecological progress remains limited. The impending challenges posed, *inter alia*, by climate change, ecological and resource crises demand new approaches. The reason that the pendulum logic no longer seems applicable is, in all likelihood, that on the one hand, the new neo-liberal global system today relies on a financialized transnational capital, coupled with global private platforms, whose global functional governance is threatening the very sovereignty of state actors; and, on the other, that the inter-state system is rather weak, pervaded by rivalries that preclude more united global action.

Part of the solution might be to scale-up the *double movement* to the global level. A vital question then becomes, what kind of processes or institutions might create sufficient countervailing influence, and alternative global governance systems, to rebalance the global system?

This volume seeks to answer just that conundrum, by providing an in-depth analysis of what is likely to drive this rebalancing – the commons. Given the current context, it is vital to start researching this topic at the global level, as well as to revisit previous work on the commons, like that of Elinor Ostrom, who has focused on their local equivalent.

For the last 20 years, we have seen emerging, in particular, global knowledge commons, for example in the form of global open source communities, which are composed of global contributive communities, and usually accompanied by democratic ‘FLOSS Foundations’ (non-profit foundations involved in open and free software projects). Such communities are operat-

ing on a transnational scale, and are often also co-evolving with global entrepreneurial coalitions that operate in the marketplace around these commons. At the local level, we also witness the rise of urban and bioregional material commons, which are reconceiving the major provisioning systems (food, energy, transport, housing), on the basis of new logics such as contributive models of democracy. The city of Ghent in Belgium, for example, has been conducting a pioneering study on the functioning of these urban commons and the necessity for public-commons cooperation and partnerships. Global and shared open design depositories for vital common infrastructures are now on the agenda, perhaps driven by coalitions of such cities. It is, therefore, unsurprising that more and more voices are calling for a reassessment of global resources – for example, natural resource commons – as global commons. For example, the Reporting 3.0 project has created a ‘Global Threshold and Allocations Council’, which looks at resource availability and sustainability to determine how much of a resource could be used on a global scale without endangering their accessibility for future generations, thereby putting biocapacity accountability on the agenda. Proposals like the Skytrust, suggested by Peter Barnes, which would consider the atmosphere as a commons, have been circulating for more than a decade, proposing ‘cap and dividend’ schemes for the allocation of these kinds of resources. But how will all this function and interact with the international system, along with powerful global multinational corporate players? Where will we find the social forces to push through these necessary reforms of the global system?

The time has come for researchers and scientists to focus their efforts on potential global governance mechanisms for the commons, existing or to come. This is precisely what has inspired this volume and why it should be considered a significant milestone in the study of the commons at the global level.

Michel Bauwens