Commoning infrastructures, infrastructural commoning

Economics and the Common(s) conference

2013, Berlin
Miguel Said Vieira

v. 1.1

# Summary

1. What are infrastructures

2. What are most infrastructures like today

3. Two challenges in moving forward

4. Some emerging examples
   (and the tensions underlying them)

Definition of infrastructures

- enable and certain activities

- aspects:

  – material (goods / services)

  – immaterial (social relations)

- produced (socially constructed),
  and not naturally given

- but what's the difference to goods that can serve as tools?
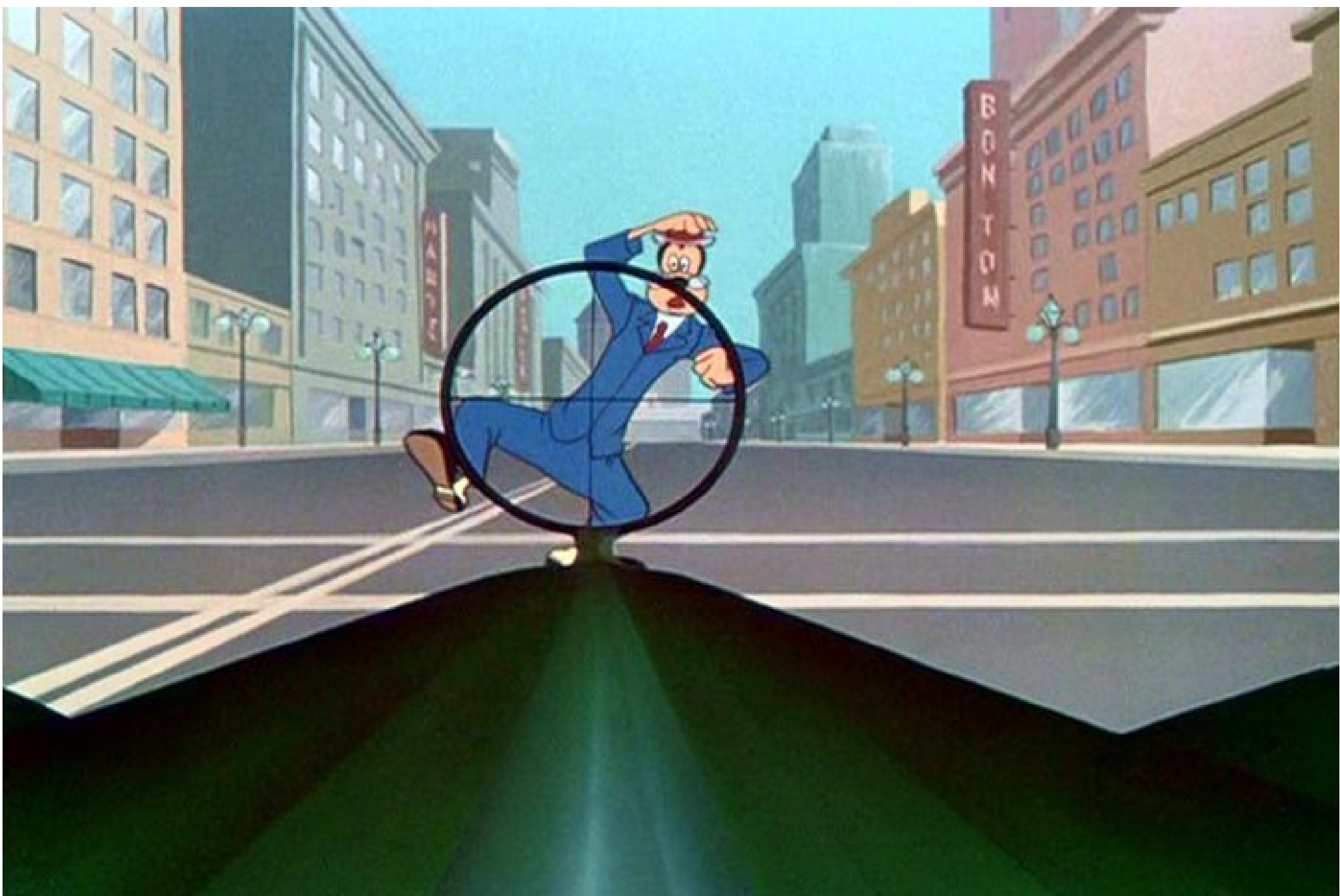
infrastructure

lies beneath
and extends beyond
individual use of tools

- In this example, infrastructure:
  - ~~car~~
  - roads
  - traffic signals
  - traffic rules
- large systems; usage by multiple actors
- eminently social

- reasons for "shared" usage:

  1. too expensive for individual provisioning (railroad system)

  2. activities requiring coordination or agreement (communications)

  3. activities that we value socially, as basic rights (public education, public health, sanitation...)

- social character: *can* be akin to commons

Infrastructures today

- most are designed to favor commodity-production

- most foster individualistic, environmentally destructive behavior

Commodities ≠ commons

- Commodities:

  - resources produced by private actors that are separated from direct workers and consumers

  - production and reproduction are also separated

  - markets as mediating instances for distribution, and as measurement tool to decide what to produce

Commodities ≠ commons

- Commons:
  - resources shared by a community, and social practices (*commoning*) to produce and maintain them
  - there is no additional mediating instance (for distribution, and for deciding what to produce): it is the commons itself
  - production and reproduction are the same

Infrastructures today

- most are designed to favor commodity-production
  - provisioning by the state (historically the majority)
  - huge infrastructures for neoextractivism
    1. environmentally destructive
    2. benefit large export-driven corporations
    3. socially corrosive
- ... or are commodities in themselves (privatization)

Infrastructures today

- most are designed to favor commodity-production

- most foster individualistic, environmentally destructive behavior

What can be done? (I)

- 1st challenge: infrastructures as commons
- How communities can appropriate themselves of existing state-provided infrastructures?
    - How to make their management more directly democratic?
    - recognize their limitations (strategically work within them?)
        - car-sharing

What can be done? (II)

- 2nd challenge: commons as infrastructures

- many commons are in fact infrastructures

  - even though some are quite topic specific or restricted geographically

- How can they be expanded and proliferated, so that our society depends less on commodities?

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Emerging alternatives

- Guifi.net
  - very successful shared community network
  - tension: rest of the internet remains privatized
- Smart grids
  - Could help sustain some energy-producing commons-based initiatives?
  - tensions:
    - market as mediator between commons communities
    - drivers are "green capitalism" and privatized sector

Emerging alternatives:
Smart grids

- smart grids for decentralized energy production
  - necessary if we want cleaner public energy without mega-projects
  - can help sustain localized communities that are able to produce more energy than they consume

Emerging alternatives
(and their contradictions, tensions)

- Brazilian example: Marabá Rural Campus

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- Brazilian example: Marabá Rural Campus
  - peasant movements (land reform), indigenous peoples and *quilombos* (former slave communities)
    - either commons-based, or very commons-friendly
  - terrain donated by MST in Eldorado dos Carajás
    - does the name of that town ring a bell?

Carlos Latuff, 2007
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eldorado_dos_Carajas_massacre_by_Latuff2.jpg

Emerging alternatives (and their tensions)

- Brazilian example: Marabá Rural Campus
  - small-scale farming, food sovereignty
  - agro-ecological principles and experimental research
  - "alternation pedagogy"
  - tensions: relationship with the state
    - lack of state commitment with land reform (risk of cooptation)
    - corruption: dean was arrested in 2012, accused of diverting funds (leads to lack of... infrastructure)
    - How to guarantee participative management?

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I want to begin by thanking the CSG for this invitation. Working on this stream has been very challenging, particularly for the following reason: if commons is a concept that only recently reentered the public debate, its relationship with infrastructure is an even less explored territory.

I'm an activist and I do academic research on commons and commodification, but I'm hardly an expert on this specific matter – infrastructure. But I hope I can convince you that building commons-enabling infrastructures will be crucial if we want to advance commons as a paradigm.

Summary

1. What are infrastructures

2. What are most infrastructures like today

3. Two challenges in moving forward

4. Some emerging examples
   (and the tensions underlying them)

Definition of infrastructures

- enable and certain activities
- aspects:
    – material (goods / services)
    – immaterial (social relations)
- produced (socially constructed),
 and not naturally given

Infrastructures are systems that enable and mediate certain activities. They'll usually have material (goods and services) and immaterial aspects (social relations).

Infrastructures are *produced*, in the sense of socially and historically constructed, and not naturally given. This is particularly important to take into account with social relations; our current dependence on markets, for instance, is not something written in stone in human nature, but rather a consequence of social relations that we have produced.

- but what's the difference to goods that can serve as tools?

But going back to that definition, many goods and services we produce can also be seen as tools that enable us to do certain activities. Say, for example, a car.
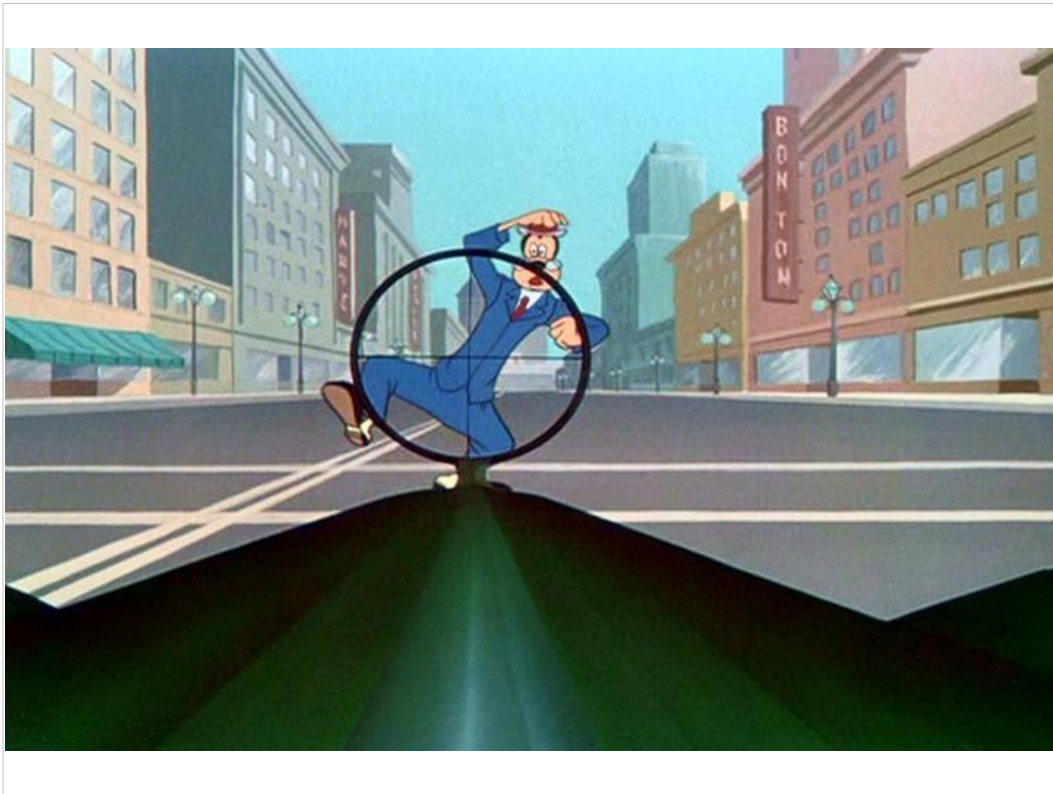
A car also enables us to do certain things. Why don't we think of a single car as an infrastructure?

infrastructure

lies beneath
and extends beyond
individual use of tools

The reason is that an infrastructure, as the word suggests, lies beneath and extends beyond an individual or small scale use of tools for an activity.

- In this example, infrastructure:
  - ~~car~~
  - roads
  - traffic signals
  - traffic rules
- large systems; usage by multiple actors
- eminently social

In this example, the infrastructure is not the car, but the system of roads, traffic signals and traffic rules.

Traffic rules are particularly important in this example. They are necessary because the infrastructure can involve the usage of a huge set of resources – roads, for instance – by many different actors. This implies that infrastructures are eminently social systems.

(But, just as a side note: this does not mean that the car is, by contrast, a purely objective thing. A car also implies social relations: it's built by hundreds of workers, it's usually bought with money obtained through wages, and so on. With infrastructures, however, the social aspect is much more prominent because of the shared usage.)

- reasons for "shared" usage:
    1. too expensive for individual provisioning (railroad system)
    2. activities requiring coordination or agreement (communications)
    3. activities that we value socially, as basic rights (public education, public health, sanitation...)
- social character: *can* be akin to commons

There are many reasons to explain why this shared usage by multiple actors is convenient:
* The infrastructure might be too expensive to be provided individually (as in a railroad system);
* it also might be related to activities that require some degree of coordination, protocols or collective agreement (as in communications);
* or it could be related to activities that we socially value and see as basic rights, and thus we collectively decide to undertake in common (as in public health, education, sanitation etc.).
This shared and social character of infrastructures also means that they have the *potential* be related to commons.

Infrastructures today

- most are designed to favor commodity-production
- most foster individualistic, environmentally destructive behavior

Unfortunately, that potential is not exactly what happens today. Most of the current infrastructures are designed to favor and extend commodity-production.

Also, many of the existing infrastructures foster individualistic and environmentally destructive behavior. But I'll get back to this second characteristic later; first, let me open a parenthesis here to clarify the distinction between commodities and commons.

Commodities ≠ commons

- Commodities:
  - resources produced by private actors that are separated from direct workers and consumers
  - production and reproduction are also separated
  - markets as mediating instances for distribution, and as measurement tool to decide what to produce

When I talk about commodity production, I should warn you I'm using a less known meaning of this term. I'll try not to bore you with the academic lingo, but I'm mostly building upon Marx and Karl Polanyi's definitions.

Commodities, for them, are goods produced through a specific set of social relations: private producers are in general separated from workers, who do not own means of production, and from consumers, who are related to the production only by the market.

Also, in the sphere of commodities, production and reproduction of life are separated: the labor to manufacture a car and, say, the unpaid labor done by a woman in her family's household are treated *as if* they were fundamentally different.

And, most importantly, markets play an essential role in commodity production. They are the tool to decide what should be produced, and how much of it. This is problematic, as markets are at most an indirect index of societal needs; what they're really good at is measuring profitability.

Commodities ≠ commons

- Commons:
  - resources shared by a community, and social practices (*commoning*) to produce and maintain them
  - there is no additional mediating instance (for distribution, and for deciding what to produce): it is the commons itself
  - production and reproduction are the same

Commons, on the other hand, are things shared by a community, and the social practices (the commoning) necessary to maintain this sharing – including the production of such things (in some cases), their maintenance, distribution and so on.

Unlike with commodities, the market is not a mandatory additional mediating instance. The commons itself fulfills the role of determining what should be produced and how it should be distributed.

Also, In commons, productive and reproductive activities are not necessarily distinguished.

Infrastructures today

- most are designed to favor commodity-production
    - provisioning by the state (historically the majority)
    - huge infrastructures for neoextractivism
        1. environmentally destructive
        2. benefit large export-driven corporations
        3. socially corrosive
- ... or are commodities in themselves (privatization)

So, after this parenthesis, it should be clear that most infrastructures built until today favor commodity production instead of commons – even though the majority of this infrastructure was built by states, and not by private actors.

In Brazil, there are clear examples of this with infrastructures built for mining and agribusiness. Much of Maristela Svampa's talk yesterday applies here. So we have large dams for powering aluminum processing industries, public research centers concentrating their efforts in sugar-cane or soy research...

All this investment fuels activities such as mining and monocultures, which: are environmentally destructive; profit large, export-driven corporations; and which are socially corrosive (as they kill jobs and livelihoods, promote dispossession and make food production more expensive as they compete for land).

Finally, aside from state-run infrastructures, there are also those fully integrated with commodity production, either because they were privatized, or because from the start they were built to be sold as commodities by private actors.

Infrastructures today

- most are designed to favor commodity-production

- most foster individualistic, environmentally destructive behavior

And now, back to the second characteristic of infrastructures, which is clearly related to the previous one: most of current infrastructures foster individualistic, environmentally destructive behavior.

An obvious example is the prevailing car culture. I think Goofy here illustrates well its individualistic aspect, which is by definition not very friendly to commons.
We should not forget, though, that this individualism is not intrinsic to human nature, but owes a great deal to public efforts and investment in infrastructures that favored automobile and oil industries (for instance, in urban planning in the USA, and in the case of industrialization policies in Latin America in the second half of the past century).

What can be done? (I)

- 1st challenge: infrastructures as commons
- How communities can appropriate themselves of existing state-provided infrastructures?
  - How to make their management more directly democratic?
  - recognize their limitations (strategically work within them?)
    - car-sharing

So now that I've painted quite a grim picture of our context, let us step back and reflect about what could or needs to be done to change that, so that we can have progressively more commons-enabling infrastructures.

In that sense, I'll propose two challenges. The first one is to turn existing infrastructures into commons.

This boils down to questions such as: How can communities appropriate themselves of existing state-provided infrastructures, and put them to work for commons? How to make the management of these infrastructures more directly democratic?

In this challenge, It is also important to recognize the limitations and affordances of certain infrastructures. Consider car-sharing initiatives: they are creative and certainly useful ways to minimize the problems of the car culture; but they don't change the underlying infrastructure, which still disfavors collective or human-powered transportation, over fossil-fuel based, individual commodities – cars. We must be aware of those limitations, but that shouldn't stop us from strategically working within them.

What can be done? (II)

- 2nd challenge: commons as infrastructures
- many commons are in fact infrastructures
  - even though some are quite topic specific or restricted geographically
- How can they be expanded and proliferated, so that our society depends less on commodities?

The 2nd challenge is to turn commons into infrastructures on a wider, societal level.

Well, many commons are indeed infrastructures (in that definition as systems that enable multiple actors to do activities). Many commons, though, are quite topic specific (for example, a free software project), or are restricted geographically.

The issue then becomes: how can they be expanded, proliferated and networked, so that our society is less dependent on commodities?

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Well, I really wanted to say that, don't panic, I have the ready answers to those two challenges, life, the universe and everything else – but obviously I don't. What I'm going to do instead, in the final part of this talk, is presenting a few examples of alternative approaches to infrastructures that might be more commons-enabling.

These are most definitely not the only ones that are out there, and I chose them because they may highlight interesting tensions and contradictions that appear in this context, or, particularly in the final case, because I suspect many people are not familiar with them.

Emerging alternatives

- Guifi.net
  - very successful shared community network
  - tension: rest of the internet remains privatized
- Smart grids
  - Could help sustain some energy-producing commons-based initiatives?
  - tensions:
    - market as mediator between commons communities
    - drivers are "green capitalism" and privatized sector

I'll start by just mentioning two examples very briefly. The first is Guifi.net, a large and successful community-shared computer network. One tension it displays is its certain fragility, as most the rest of the internet's infrastructure is private, and not a commons; Guifi.net is connected to the internet, but that connection is a strategical bottleneck.

Another example is the use of smart grids for decentralized energy production. While they could help some energy-producing commons-based initiatives, it would add a market layer if those initiatives wanted to share energy among themselves. Also, the trend favoring smart grids is not driven by commons, but by the "green capitalism" paradigm, which ignores the issue of excessive consumption, and by the fact that the sector has been largely privatized.

Emerging alternatives:
Smart grids

- smart grids for decentralized energy production
  - necessary if we want cleaner public energy without mega-projects
  - can help sustain localized communities that are able to produce more energy than they consume

The first example is the concept of smart grids in energy distribution. They have only been implemented in a few cities. A smart grid differs from regular grids in that it makes it very easy to monitor and control what happens in it; and because of that, smart grids allow us something which is almost impossible in regular grids: having a network of varied, distributed points of energy input without compromising the grid's stability.

This has two interesting commons-related aspects. First, if we want to produce cleaner energy without resorting to commons-threatening Belo Monte-style mega-dams, we'll need more varied and distributed energy sources, and that'll be hard without smart grids.

Secondly, that very situation could help sustain some local, commons-based initiatives that are able to produce energy, and that produce more than they consume. Smart grids would allow them to feed that energy to the grid and be compensated by this.

Emerging alternatives
(and their contradictions, tensions)

- Brazilian example: Marabá Rural Campus

My second example is specific from Brazil: a school in the North Region called Marabá Rural Campus.

It's a branch of a public higher education institute, and
it offers technical and undergrad degrees in fields
such as agroecology and rural education.
I find it an interesting case of communities trying to
appropriate themselves of state infrastructures, such
as those of public education.

Emerging alternatives:
Marabá Rural Campus

- Brazilian example: Marabá Rural Campus
  - peasant movements (land reform), indigenous peoples and *quilombos* (former slave communities)
    - either commons-based, or very commons-friendly
  - terrain donated by MST in Eldorado dos Carajás
    - does the name of that town ring a bell?

This reading of mine is based on the fact that the school is focused (even through its students selection mechanisms) on peasant movements involved with land reform, indigenous peoples and *quilombos* (which are former slave communities). While diverse, the communities from those groups are usually very pro-commons – and in many cases, even strictly commons-based, sharing land and producing collectively.

Along with workers unions, these communities were directly responsible for the pressure that led the government to build the school; even the land where it is located was donated by MST, the Brazilian landless workers movement.

The location is particularly relevant: it's surrounded by lots allocated to land reform, in the town of Eldorado dos Carajás. Does that name ring a bell to anyone in the room?

Carlos Latuff, 2007
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eldorado_dos_Carajas_massacre_by_Latuff2.jpg

That's where, in 1996, 19 people were murdered by the police during a manifestation for land reform. Ten of the 19 murdered were shot point blank.

So in a sense, this is really a battleground between commons-based initiatives on the one side, and neoextractivism and land speculation on the other. A large land-owner of the region was charged with paying the police to kill the protesters, but he wasn't convicted.

I apologize for a cartoon that, unlike the ones I've shown before, doesn't come even close to being funny. (As you can also see from the slide, I inspired myself in Silke's remarks about a certain animator's predatory stance to the commons, and decided that in this presentation I'd only reference those creators that give back to the commons. Latuff, the artist that drew this cartoon, releases his works on the public domain.)

Emerging alternatives
(and their tensions)

- Brazilian example: Marabá Rural Campus
  - small-scale farming, food sovereignty
  - agro-ecological principles and experimental research
  - "alternation pedagogy"
  - tensions: relationship with the state
    - lack of state commitment with land reform (risk of cooptation)
    - corruption: dean was arrested in 2012, accused of diverting funds (leads to lack of... infrastructure)
    - How to guarantee participative management?

The Marabá Campus has small-scale family farming, food sovereignty and agroecology as its principles, and blends them with research focused on the communities' needs and knowledges. One of the strategies to achieve this is the "alternation pedagogy": 1/3 of the students' formative time is spent in their respective communities. This allows a richer educational process, minimizes rural exodus and strengthens threatened indigenous cultures.

There are definitely tensions in this example as well, mostly in the relationship with the state. The Brazilian government since Lula (and including him, to a certain extent) shows a lack of practical commitment to land reform, so the risk of cooptation looms.

There's also the issue of how to guarantee participative management. While this preoccupation is expressed in the school's institutional organization, it also depends a lot on struggles. Just to exemplify, the dean of the larger institution the campus is attached to was jailed, accused of diverting millions of dollars, while the school lacked so much infrastructure (how ironical) that the students went on a strike.

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Special thanks:

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Thanks for your attention. Before I finish, I want to give a special thanks to Stefan Meretz, who helped a lot in conceiving in preparing this talk. A round of applause for him, please!