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The Affective Underpinnings of British Toryism: Nostalgia, Futurity, and the Performativity of the Commons

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Introduction

The commons has occupied, in British culture, a dual position between the wistful vision of the rural anchored in the public imagination as a nostalgic image of past communal life, and a potentially revolutionary space of resistance against capital power relations and homogenisation; a place of non-utilitarian living and whimsical relational politics. It has consequently emerged as a powerful undercurrent influencing artistic expressions and political ideologies across the spectrum, encompassing both left-wing and right-wing perspectives. Crucially, it also carries a legacy of collective loss that is not only evident in the 1217 Charter of the Forest defining the economic rights of those without property with regard to their use of the commons, but also in the Robin Hood tradition, and in Early Modern greenwood plays problematising the enclosures of forests and pastures, which entailed fencing off common lands, extinguishing customary rights, and displacing farmers and squatters who relied on them for survival (cf. Federici 2018: 15; Linebaugh 2014: ch. 9). Robert Ian Moore traces the origins of these developments to societal restructuring and redistribution of wealth in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, marked by increasing persecution of the poor and of minorities (Moore 2007: 92-93, 97). Feudal relations further eroded in the early seventeenth century, driven by the commercialisation of agriculture and the enclosures of the commons, which deprived people of arable land and pastures. With enclosures accelerating in the 18th century, the concept of the "utopian spirit of the commons" had acquired a lasting significance by the 19th century, as Carolyn J. Lesjak's research on British realism and the enduring impact of enclosures indicates (2021: 3).

Our project, *The Performativity of the Commons*, aims to explore the performative nature of the commons in British culture up to the present and its intersections with concepts of nostalgia, futurity, identity, and neoliberalism. Drawing on the theories of Lauren Berlant, Svetlana Boym, George Caffentzis, Silvia Federici, Caroline Levine, Peter Linebaugh, and Victor Turner, we will critically analyse the ways in which

communalism is constructed within British public culture. In particular, we will examine the figure of the commons as it appears *within* the established British polity, rather than outside of it: what is commonly called the village green. This form of the commons has relationships to centre-right and right-wing politics that others do not. By examining the relationship between the commons, political structures, and literary and cultural forms, we seek to uncover how the myth of the village green is structured in such a way that it imbues the utopian performativity of the commons with conceptual markers of neoliberalism while also containing the possibilities of its undoing. By exploring the performative aspects of the commons and its connections to the affective underpinnings of British national and political identity, we aim to foster a critical discourse that explores the commons' potential as a site of resistance and transformative politics.

This article aims to launch our project. It begins with a discussion of performativity and why we argue this is the best way of understanding the means through which the sense of the commons is achieved. It then looks at the cultural and political content of this sense of the commons, with a particular reference to Svetlana Boym's work, and then explores the working out of this content in 20th and 21st century culture. We conclude with the political relevance of this work and what we hope the project will achieve.

Performativity in the Context of the Commons

This article does not primarily address the commons in its actualised form of the village green as a geographic feature of English villages and towns, or even as a static image that appears in contemporary British literature, television, theatre, and film. Instead, our discussion here relates to the *performativity* of the village green —the way it is enacted, not only the way it is described or narrated. Even when that living out takes place in a fictional or mediatised frame, we suggest that the affective, cultural, and political meaning of the village green emerges from its performance, not its illustration. This approach is derived from performance theory, a discipline that arose jointly from the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin, the cultural anthropology of Victor Turner, and the innovations in theatre studies from New York scholar and performance maker Richard Schechner. These three led to a means of analysing public actions as artworks, political interventions, and proposers of philosophy. The claim is not that performance can *demonstrate* these ideas, affects and interventions, but can constitute them. The contemporary performance philosopher Laura Cull discusses the ways in which "performance itself thinks" (Cull 2014: 25) in a parallel sense to Victor Turner's discussion about the effectiveness of rituals as social performances (Turner 1974) forty years earlier.

Like speech acts, performative acts *create,* rather than describe, but there is an important political valence to this sort of analysis that comes from its roots in the 1970s artistic counterculture of happenings and experimental theatre. Because it is not a form of discourse, performance does not require its practitioners to have a particular expertise in its techniques or membership in an artistic or literary clique. Performance, it is claimed, has some playful ability to elude the established structures of knowledge and power, making it a more democratic tool for aesthetic and political world-making. Famously, Judith Butler has analysed the performative construction of gender roles, and, especially with reference to drag, has pointed out the subversive potential that this performativity enables when it is used through play, parody, or other forms of taboo-breaking behaviour (Butler 1990). Amongst other sources, Butler is drawing on the tradition of the anthropology of ritual in this work, citing Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1996) and mentioning Lévi-Strauss in particular. This line of thought has been developed in an overlapping but distinct manner by theatre-derived performance theorists who try to understand the political potentials of theatrical (and para-theatrical) performance. For example, contemporary scholars have examined the political potential of performance by non-specialists (Fisher 2015) or even non-human animals and plants (Marder 2015; Rothenberg 2015). One key element of performance is its temporality. Performances iterate well—Schechner differentiated the rituals and theatre pieces he was studying from ordinary action by calling them "twice-behaved behaviors" or "restored behaviors" (Schechner 2002: 28 *et passim*)—but by their nature, performances are necessarily finite in time. The performance theorist Peggy Phelan even sees this effervescence as essential to the ontology of performance, which "becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan 1993: 146). This is not a failing, but a virtue. For Phelan, if performance were to be "saved, recorded [or] documented" it would "participate in the circulation of representations" (ibid.), by which she evokes both the cultural economy and the circulation of discourse.

But what is it that is being created by the performance of the commons? Yes, the answer to that may resist discourse and embrace ambiguity and multivocality, as we describe below, but this does not make the question irrelevant. We argue that, on the village green, a commons is performed into being as a space of collective affect and endeavour. The commons here is not (just) a physical place or an economic structure, though it may affect these. It is a sense of identity, togetherness, and commonality that seems to transcend social structures. This affective dimension serves as the core purpose and outcome of the commons' performance, shaping its social, cultural and political significance.

The affect we are describing is akin to what Turner, in the late 1960s, called *communitas*. Turner coined the term (from the Latin for community) to describe the affect of pre-social interpersonal solidarity that he saw in religious ritual, particularly

pilgrimages and coming-of-age rituals in which a group of pilgrims or initiands travel outside their home, lose markers of their identity such as names, ranks and distinctive clothing, and undergo an emotionally intensive experience together (see Turner 1969). There was a clear relationship between the 'anti-structural' affect of *communitas* and the Durkheimian structured community; however the two are distinct. But we can be more precise here. In the years after developing the notion, Turner began to differentiate between three different kinds of communitas, each with a different relationship to its surrounding social system. The original notion of communitas became known as 'existential' communitas:

> the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which, when it happens, tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as a homogeneous, unstructured, and free community (Turner 1973: 193)

But he identified two others, both of which were derivative of that existential origin:

> (2) normative communitas where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources to keep the members of a group alive and thriving and the necessity for social control among those members in pursuance of these and other collective goals, the original existential communitas is organized into a perduring social system …. and (3) ideological communitas, which is a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models or blueprints of societies believed by their authors to exemplify or supply the optimal conditions for existential communitas. (Turner 1973: 193-94)

All three of these forms lay claim to the same affective core; they are differentiated not by their aims, but by their consequences. Based on our project's observation of the performative work done through the village green, we hypothesise that what is being brought into being is, generally, this second form of normative communitas. Just as Turner argues that normative communitas is an institutional ossification of the original 'immediate' experience of existential communitas, we argue that performances of the village green tend to serve as institutional ossifications of the national communitarian ideal of the commons. Our argument is that this allows performances of the village green to evoke a sense of national togetherness and simultaneously provide the cultural justification and underpinnings to contemporary British Toryism. As we will discuss below, however, this can take place in different ways; some performances of the village green go much farther, aiming for an ideological communitas which suggests a much more rigid, exclusionary, blood-and-soil model of nationalism.

A more recent articulation of this affect of communitas may make this idea clearer. Roberto Esposito describes the sense of community as drawing on the notion of the shared gift, or *munus.* More specifically, it is not an (economic) *exchange* of gifts, as in Marcel Mauss, but a sense of obligation *to* the other in the language of Jean-Luc Nancy or Emmanuel Levinas: "a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack"

(Esposito 2010: 6; cf. Mauss 2006 [1950]; cf. Nancy 1986: 35 *et passim*; cf. Levinas 2013; cf. Exner 2021: 24-29). This sense that the community is built out of the (inherently unfulfillable) obligations that we each have to one another, rather than from the benefits we derive from that community, echoes Turner's "direct, immediate, and total" communitas-building experiences. It also establishes a cultural pattern that can find an easy political analogue in the withdrawal of the (inhuman-seeming) welfare state and its replacement by millions of individual relationships of mutual obligation.

In analysing how this performative creation of communitas takes place in culture, often, the village green itself does not performatively construct the common; instead, it serves as a physical and conceptual frame for other performances that do the work of commoning. Practices that would otherwise seem mundane, such as picnicking, dancing, sport, or baking, are afforded the power to bring the commons into being by this frame. As a technique, framing is a regular means by which performance differentiates itself and gains potency. Schechner pays much attention to the beginnings and ends of artistic works, and scholars of religion such as Catherine Bell point to the ways in which the formality of a performance such as ritual rigidly limits *how* and *what* it can communicate, making its emotional force all the stronger.[1] A tea party may seem not to communicate or advocate for anything, but a community tea party on the village green can nevertheless do the work of constituting that village's identity, solidarity, and place within the British nation.

The performative model would suggest that it is precisely such 'meaningless' activities which are most appropriate for the community-building work of the village green. Consider, for instance, one of the most famous invocations of the village green: Romantic poet William Blake's "The Echoing Green", published in *Songs of Innocence* (1789). The poem depicts children in 'sport' and 'play' on the green under the reminiscing gaze of an older man, the poets' relief etchings illustrating the poem show some youths holding what appears to be cricket bats (Blake 2008: 7-8, first and second plate). These acts of play seem to connect the three generations: the playing youth, their mothers who collect them, and "Old John with white hair" who reminisces about his own childhood of play (7-8, lines 11-20). No one speaks meaningfully to one another (though

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[1] Bell refers to this as 'formalism' (Bell 1997: 139-45). From a more technical semiotic perspective, a generation earlier the anthropologist Maurice Bloch coined a phrase that has become key for the study of ritual: 'you cannot argue with a song' (Bloch 1974). As Edelman (2015) discusses with respect to the performativity of civic and religious rituals, Bloch's point is that songs—as highly formal communicative forms, like rituals—effectively pre-determine what the singer can communicate, and thus are unable to articulate an argument that could be analysed or assented to. So the song as a form of communication has "no propositional force. It has only illocutionary force" (Bloch 1974: 76). To Bloch, this makes rituals inherently *a*political, as they lack the linguistic precision and flexibility to make political arguments. We might re-consider this example as a way in which certain forms of cultural communication need not be intellectually convincing (or even clear) to provide a substantial political effect. In fact, they may be more effective precisely in their non-articulation of any particular belief.

they do "laugh" [8, line 15]) or does anything productive. It seems that this performance of leisure is what in fact builds this community. Note, however, that even in its creation, there is a note of nostalgia for the past; the village green looks backward, not forward. These elements place our model of the village green in contrast to two other models of the commons that have been suggested as socially constructive: the economic and the discursive. We will present these other models in the next section to make that contrast clear.

The economic model connects the community to the notion of communal property. In literature, its representation is common land, and these representations tend to highlight how the loss of this common land to acts of enclosure devastated the economic model of the English peasantry in the early modern era, pushing them towards wage labour. Geographically, the village green is part of the land historically designated for common use in a village, often synonymous with 'the commons', of which it is technically just a part, as the commons could encompass much more land, such as woodlands and pastures. The economic model sees the village green exclusively as a synecdoche for that larger common land, rather than a cultural form derived from it. In this model, those who perform these acts of enclosure are shown as (aristocratic) landowners who are asserting an economic power alongside their class prestige as an act of proto-capitalist villainy. DC Moore's *Common,* staged at the National Theatre in London in 2017, used such a model, as did the slightly more comic *St George and the Dragon* by Rory Mullarkey, also staged at the National Theatre that year. This, too, is the form of the commons engaged by the concept of the 'tragedy of the commons,' made famous by ecologist Garrett Hardin's article in 1968 (below). The commons here is a productive economic resource, whether a defined plot of land or some other communal but finite resource such as clean air or water, that can be exhausted, privatised, mis-managed, and so on. The nostalgic note present here comes from a (perceived) past abundance that is no longer present. But this is not the performative model of the common we are proposing with respect to the village green. The village green is not treated as a finite-but-communal economic resource, as if it were the remnant of unenclosed grazing land. Instead, it is used as a sanctuary *from* the economic, affording possibilities for communal leisure, celebration and nostalgia that are human before they are productive. This is a performative distinction; the same plot of land can be used (and shown to be used) as a (collective) economic resource or a space of leisure and identity. Caryl Churchill's *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), like Moore's piece, does the former, while Mike Bartlett's *Albion* (2017) does the latter.

There is a historical precedent for this tension between common and village green in the notion of the 'forest,' which, in Norman Britain, referred not to a woodland, necessarily, but to an area of land that had been set aside by the king for hunting and recreation and thus could not be cultivated or developed. The 1217 Charter of the Forest

reasserted free men's rights to the forests for these purposes. This has, for centuries, been a cultural right at least as much as an economic one. Robert Pogue Harrison (1992) discusses how in the 1592 *Treatise of Forest Laws,* written by John Manwood, gamekeeper to Queen Elizabeth I, the function of the forest comes from the presence of wildlife, explicitly linking it to a nostalgic notion of the protection of primaeval nature and the religious notion of sanctuary, offering a space of protection from ordinary law (Harrison 1993: 72, 93). It is not incidental that these forests were guaranteed in the name of the king, not in the name of the law that he stood over. As such, the village green appeals to an authority that seems to sit above, not within, politics. In the terms of Giorgio Agamben, the authority of the forest is part of the ceremonial regality of the king (which Agamben calls 'glory'), rather than the governmental system of his ministers (which Agamben connects with the notion of *oikonomia* and calls 'power') (Agamben 2011: xii, cf. 242).[2] Under the sign of democracy, this suprapolitical royal authority lies with the people, and so, in its contemporary incarnation, the village green has become associated with a populist sense of national identity as well. We will expand upon this below.

The discursive model of the commons, which also contrasts with what we are proposing here, is associated, in different forms, with Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner. Habermas's notion of the public sphere, tied to the rise of print culture and the opportunity for collective debate offered by early modern coffeehouses, is well known. Habermas is often read to be less concerned with the class-based and gendered economies of the coffeehouse than he is with the creation of a community of democratic political subjects through discourse, though the importance of his contribution does rest on the insightful and rigorous link he draws between the two. But his more recent work discusses the limitations of this form of political community. In *An Awareness of What is Missing* (2010), he sets himself into dialogue with a group of Jesuit priests on the need for a felt sense of social commonality in order to provide a context in which a rational, liberal democracy can function. In this, he gestures towards a role that religion, if properly framed and understood, can play in contemporary political life. He argues:

> [P]ractical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, an awareness of what cries out to heaven. (Habermas 2010: 19)

Note that while this 'solidarity' (or its lack) resembles the Turnernian notion of communitas, it is here the responsibility of 'practical reason' to achieve it. Habermas does not propose a solution to the problem he identifies in this essay, but in that he gestures towards one, it lies in the realm of political philosophy, reconfigured theology,

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[2] Boll makes this argument in *Scapegoats, Devils, Outlaws, Witches* (2022).

or the application of reason. His project is an epistemological one, but one which points to the limits of what reasonable discourse can achieve. It is not that performance can cancel reason out, but as mentioned above, its formalism means that it necessarily appeals to a different sort of authority than a discursive one.[3]

Michael Warner's notion of publics and counterpublics is not quite so purely intellectual, but it still retains a core of discourse. His concept of a 'public' is a loosely assembled group that comes into being as a consequence, and for the purposes, of discourse. Warner embraces this circular, 'autotelic' definition, calling a public 'an addressable object [that] is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence." (Warner 2002: 414). Like Habermas, he argues that these publics are necessarily outside of the purview of the state. But unlike Habermas, Warner emphasises the fluidity of a public: it is necessarily a relationship amongst strangers who are addressed both personally and impersonally, making it necessarily indefinite. These publics can be crucial for personal identity and the creation of a sense of a world—especially those socially marginalised ones he calls 'counterpublics'—but their existence is wholly defined by the discourse that addresses them and that they enable. This means that, for Warner, a public that did not centre itself around discourse could not exist. His definition of discourse is a wide one, certainly including popular cultural forms like television and folk rock, but because these are treated as forms of communication, they need to be *articulate* in order to function as a socially creative force. They need to communicate a particular clear meaning—one that can be "run ... up the flagpole", in Warner's terms (Warner 2002: 422)—in order to organise a public. Our contention in this project is that while images of the village green do, of course, *appear* in discourse, it is their very *in*articulateness as performances that make them so broadly resonant. Freed from the need to articulate a single, clear message, a performative model of the commons can evoke more, construct more, and gesture towards more models of sociality than a discursive one could.

Because we read the commons as something highly performative, it is imperative that we understand not just *how* it works, but *why* it has become such an important aspect of contemporary culture. The answer may be found in the commons' history of enclosure and loss, securing its place at the heart of a nostalgic vision of British identity.

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[3] Elsewhere, Edelman has argued that this is why performance is a particularly apt way of responding to Habermas's concern about the need to, but danger of, finding an appropriate place of religion as democratic public life. See Chambers, du Toit and Edelman 2013.

Nostalgic Futurity and the Commons as a Socio-Critical Concept

The relevance of Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia and its relationship to the future becomes apparent in the context of the romanticisation of the commons and the longing for a space untouched by the presence of others (cf. also Berlant 2022: 86). Boym explores nostalgia as a complex emotional experience existing as both a historical and constructed phenomenon, creating a dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective. Although nostalgia appears to be a longing for a *place*, a kind of homesickness imagined to be cured by the return to one's home country, she argues it is primarily a yearning for a different *time*, opposed to "the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (2008: xv). Within the nostalgic resides the wish "to turn history into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the [modern, Western] human condition" (ibid.). Highlighting the intricate connection between nostalgia, temporality, and the interplay between personal and collective dimensions, Boym suggests that nostalgia is shaped by the "relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" and therefore differs from melancholia, which relates to the individual consciousness (Boym 2007: 9). Importantly, she asserts that "fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future" (8-9) thus emphasising the utopian and indeed futural quality inherent to nostalgia, though it diverges from traditional futuristic visions: rather than being directed solely towards the future or the past, nostalgia can also manifest as a sideways longing—an expression of discontent with the conventional confines of time and space (ibid.).

Futurity should here be understood not just as the notion of what will happen, or of a time that is not yet, but as the notion of the future imbued with affective attachments such as hope and fear; a concept with a strong focus on potentiality and transformation. Situated at the intersection of identity and the creation of imagined worlds, the exploration of the past from a future-oriented perspective expands the possibilities for the present, introducing new, potentially transformative, political culture and concerns. It is useful here to think back to theatre and performance scholar Jill Dolan's understanding of performance practices that work to imagine worlds and bring them into being as "civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm" (Dolan 2005: 8), allowing us to connect the concept of futurity to Esposito's proposal to understand communitas as a continuous mutual obligation to fill the lack at the centre of the community. Community may thus be understood as a relationship that is actively forged by choosing to take up the obligation and acting upon it. This understanding of community, and by extension, of commoning, as a relationship of constant performative action leads us to the futural aspect of the commons as a concept,

engaged in building "a potential world" around normative principles of being (cf. Berlant 2022: 83).

As a social and critical concept oriented towards the future, the commons have become part of the foundations of contemporary transformative politics (Velicu & García-López 2018: 55; cf. Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Barbagallo, Beuret and Harvie 2019; Federici 2019; Exner et al. 2021; Obeng-Odoom 2021; Volont 2022; Levine 2023). Departing from state- and market-driven approaches, the commons are seen as an alternative solution to communal challenges such as adequate provision of healthcare, social services, child care, education, and food, emphasising self-organised collaboration and solidarity (Velicu & García-López: 56). The mainstream theory of the commons, as developed by political economist Elinor Ostrom, explores possibilities for cooperation among individuals to address shared problems. It promotes cooperative relationships based on trust and reciprocity, challenging the traditional neoclassical economic model of "rational egoism" that assumes people will not cooperate when faced with common challenges. Ostrom suggests that communities of people who share a collective past and envision a shared future are most likely to engage in collective action (1990: 88), thus highlighting the concept's inherent futurity and political potency.

Sceptics often refer to the 'tragedy of the commons' to question its long-term feasibility. This notion, popularised by ecologist Garett Hardin's influential 1968 article, depicts the collapse of common resources due to a lack of trust, reciprocity, collective action, and rules (Hardin 1968; Ostrom 1990: 2-3). Hardin's argument, and the ensuing line of economic thought, is often criticised for its dismissal of a systemic approach and its misrepresentation of the commons as merely a form of jointly owned resource. Critics of Hardin's argument counter that the underlying problem lies not in a lack of rules but in new enclosures and individualistic subjectivities stemming from capitalist developments (Bollier 2014: 24, 26; Linebaugh 2014: ch. 9; Albernaz 2021: 131-34).

More recently, the commons as a concept has been incorporated into an environmental approach to literary and cultural criticism (cf. Wall 2014; Marzec 2015). Stephanie LeMenager traces how the traditional property form of the commons becomes central in discussions of climate change and sustainability of global resources and ties it to questions of decolonisation (LeMenager 2021: 12), arguing that the notion of the tragedy of the commons is embedded in imperialism, specifically "in British India and the Americas, where enclosures were justified […] as a means of putting Indigenous 'wastelands' into 'productive' relationships with world markets" (15), a line also furthered by Joseph Albernaz, who returns to Hardin's article and his later publication *The Immigration Dilemma: Avoiding the Tragedy of the Commons* (1995) to expose how Hardin links the enclosure of the commons and its association with ruin directly to racist thought and how pro-enclosure views and the logic of walls emerge from this nexus

(Albernaz 2021: 120). Drawing on literary scholar Rob Nixon,[4] Carolyn J. Lesjak reads enclosures as events of 'slow violence' that continue to resonate in the twenty-first century, exemplified by various movements, including Occupy, Indigenous campaigns for decolonization, ecological movements advocating for a "global commons", and debates on digital forms of common life, all of which highlight both the politics of the commons and critiques of their normative ossification under neoliberalism (Lesjak 2021: 3-4).

George Caffentzis explores the surprising connections between the revival of the commons and capitalist, anti-capitalist, and nationalist ideologies. He challenges the view that the commons is inherently anti-capitalist and instead argues that it serves as "neoliberalism's plan B" (Caffentzis 2010; also cf. Meißner 2022). Noting that the revival of the commons from a capitalist standpoint emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, he argues that it coincided with a conceptual shift exemplified by

> the development of a related set of concepts like 'social capital,' 'civil society,' 'associational life' that were joined with the even vaguer and older all-pervading concepts like 'community,' 'culture,' and 'civilization'. A good index of this conceptual change can be noted in the substitution of the warm and fuzzy phrase 'business community' for the sharply delineated 'capitalist class' in the terminology of the social sciences. (Caffentzis 2010: 23)

A comparable conceptual and terminological shift is also evident in the British Conservative Party's "Big Society" election manifesto (April 2010), which aimed to integrate the free market with social solidarity and voluntary work, reframing capitalist values as a seeming flowering of social capital and community. The manifesto proposed empowering neighbourhood groups as the "little platoons" of civil society and the building blocks of the "Big Society" (2010: 1), encouraging the state to withdraw and integrating the free market with a theory of social solidarity based on voluntary work and the trickle-down effect. The social aspect emphasised the importance of family, community, and voluntary groups as buffers against both state power and widespread market individualism. Though allegedly striving for a transformative cultural change, with individuals relying less on officials, local authorities, and central government for solutions to their problems, but feeling empowered to help themselves and their communities instead (cf. Cameron 2010), it should be regarded as the reframing of rolled-back social services and infrastructures (also cf. Meißner 2022: 42) and a veiled justification for austerity politics.

Resonating with 19th-century conservative communitarian opposition to state intervention and promoting paternalism through mutual aid, philanthropy, and voluntary activity, the socio-political approach of the "Big Society" evokes a

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[4] Lesjak here refers to Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).

romanticised vision of a contented pre-modern village community. This "privatization and moralization of public services" (Meißner 2022: 45) creates a sense of personal and collective identity in line with neoliberal subjectivity (cf. Tyler 2020). It prompts us to question whether commoning and the commons have been performed in such a way in contemporary British culture as to promote a reactionary fantasy aimed at transforming an entire nation's self-image into that of a picturesque village green by proclaiming it as a vital emblem of national identity. On the economic front, the "Big Society" aligns with a form of libertarian authoritarianism, which highlights consumer freedom of choice but acknowledges the role of the state in shaping and directing available choices for individuals. It is crucial to acknowledge that the resurgence of the conceptualised commons is not exclusively tied to transformative politics and anti-capitalist ideals.

How the social commons is conceived of and which role it is ascribed seems to separate into three forms: nostalgic (both left- and right-wing restorative), fatalistic (tragedy of the commons), and futural (reflective and focussed on transformation). The final section explores contemporary examples of these three movements.

The Commons as Identity in the 21st Century

It may not be a coincidence that the National Theatre—the traditional site for British 'state of the nation' plays—mounted two productions that centred on the village green in 2017. The question of the how the commons, and the nostalgic communitas it evoked, were to be integrated into British culture was a question of immense public concern at that moment. Edoardo Campanella and Marta Dassù posit that the late 2010s can be characterised as an "age of nostalgia" (Campanella & Dassù 2019: 3). They point to the British 2016 Brexit referendum as a prime example of this phenomenon:

> During the referendum campaign, and in the aftermath of the vote, nostalgic arguments have been used defensively against the European Union, offensively to boost Britain's global influence, and cooperatively to strengthen ties with its former colonies. (Campanella & Dassù 2019: 4)

Britishness reveals itself here as both an inward- and an outward-looking emotion; a "nostalgic nationalism" shaped by conflicting worldviews of "Global Britain" and "Little England" that reflect late Victorian political debates (9) has emerged as a distinct category of nationalism (12), and is exemplified by the country's attempt to turn back time by leaving the European Union (53).

This form of "restorative nostalgia", directed at a return to cultural origins, whether these are historically established or fully invented versions of these, has been identified by Boym as sitting at the core of recent national and religious revivals (Boym 2008: 41-

42). Understanding nostalgia as a collective feeling and as a concept, Boym differentiates between restorative nostalgia, which focuses on the home (*nóstos*) and aims at a "transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home", and reflective nostalgia, which "thrives in *álgos*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately" (13). In the development of our theory below, we will tie this reflective nostalgia to the notion of the futural. Restorative and reflective nostalgia are not absolute binaries, Boym explains, but exist on a spectrum or may even overlap. While restorative nostalgia does not recognise itself as nostalgia, "but rather as truth and tradition", reflective nostalgia

> dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym 2010)

However, in contemporary literature and culture, we have identified a third form of nostalgia tied to the notion of the common, one we wish to call 'fatalistic'. The perceived imminent loss of the commons, coupled with a desire to 'return to the land' and the longing for a romanticised version of the past are also evident in contemporary British nature and travel writings. Notably, Robert Macfarlane's poignant reflections on old British locations, hiking routes, historical landscapes, cultural and natural phenomena have garnered immense acclaim for their captivating writing style and their ability to rekindle interest in British and other landscapes (Macfarlane 2007, 2012, 2015). His thoroughly nostalgic, opulent texts delve deep into words, expressions, and pathways, aiming to recapture and perhaps preserve a language that can transport readers back to the land and reclaim lost time. They also evoke the experiential nature of walking through the English landscape, gesturing towards a performativity present in these otherwise literary texts. The notion that an "authentic" British identity can be found in the rural also runs through perhaps the most influential British 'state of the nation' play of the first decade of the 21st century, Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009). In hindsight, the play, seductive and complex as it is, demonstrates a remarkable lack of self-reflection—in fact, Gemma Edwards quite rightly criticises that Butterworth's romantic representation of rural England is indicative of a largely unquestioned English cultural dominance, and that it gestures to the idea of "Deep England" as defined by Patrick Wright (Edwards 2021: 283; cf. Wright 1985). This deployment of the character of Rooster Byron as the masculine, rural, anti-structural ideal as a performative invocation of an essentialist English nationalism in *Jerusalem* finds an echo in Paul Kingsnorth's uneasy and often reactionary writings about a "hard-to-pin-down loss of many of the things [he] felt made [his] country distinctive" (Kingsnorth 2017: 198). Kingsnorth's meditations on *Real England* (2008) seem less to aim to 'make England great again', in the sense of restoring a perhaps-never-existent nostalgic past, and more towards the wholescale abandonment of the current, irredeemably corrupt, England, and to simply

live alone in the forest with those few fellow clear-headed men (not people) who see this corruption as he does.

Representing the concept of the commons, the village green in popular representation often evokes the escapism of J.R.R. Tolkien's shire: a restoratively nostalgic creation which science fiction author Michael Moorcock famously dismissed as a "Surrey of the mind"[5]. Whimsically, it resonates through the late 1960s in the form of rock group The Kinks' tongue-in-cheek opening song to their concept album *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* (1968), where a list of paradigmatically British cultural indicators evoke a quirky imaginary space tied to a narrative of late Empire and a plucky Blitz and post-war spirit.[6] As a contemporary cultural marker of British identity, it can be found, for example, in the first sequence of *Isles of Wonder*, the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics as created by film and stage director Danny Boyle, in which a village green forms the centrepiece of the arena and contributes to the large-scale nostalgic framing of a semi-mythological past. The ceremony's celebration and idealisation of Britishness-as-place in the form of the rural idyll refers, of course, to an imagined homeland, a conceptual place rather than the representative of the literal countryside. This portrayal of the country as a unified, if eccentric, community sharing a common history aligns with the *mise en scène* and the deliberate multi-ethnic make-up of the successful British television programme *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-), a competitive baking show inspired by rural baking competitions at village fairs. In a large tent in a country-house garden, it stages an English pastoral, sporting a decidedly retro design and feeding into the collective nostalgia for the English countryside of the past. The outdoor, garden setting—not at all typical for cooking competitions—evokes not just the domestic comfort of baked goods but a commons collectively reclaimed. Each season's final mimics a fête on the village green: a community of friends and neighbours gathered to share beautiful food and company in the sun. The programme does not so much celebrate baking as labour as collective feasting—and the preparations for it—as a shared joy. The village green blossoms virtually, created by fanbase efforts in the participatory space offered by the podcast *DumTeeDum* (2014-) centred on the long-running BBC radio soap *The Archers* (1950-), which itself is set in a fictional, yet quintessential, English village (cf. Korfmacher 2022). It is revered by cottagecore aesthetics celebrated on the social media platforms Tumblr, Instagram and TikTok (cf. Rao-Kashi 2020), and summoned into being at the annual Glastonbury Festival's Green Fields area.

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[5] In his 1978 essay "Epic Pooh" for the British Science Fiction Association; later published in a revised version in *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy*, from which we quote (London: Gollancz, 1987: 179-208, here: 185).

[6] Boll elaborates on this argument in the forthcoming article "'The Village Green Preservation Society': The Kinks, the Bake Off, and the Performativity of the Commons".

We argue that the imagined commons comes into being, in all these cases, by the performance of collective endeavours, by co-constituting the commons in the sense that Turner, above, described as communitas. These patterns are domesticated by the cultural and social system of neoliberalism that creates and exploits them, making that communitas take a normative form. The commons is therefore performative, which extends to the affective basis of people's claims to a common identity. Once a commons has formed, though, it is already threatened by enclosure, by being rendered exclusive. The monetisation of the commons as a neoliberal form of enclosure has been theorised by Imogen Tyler, who speaks of austerity as an enclosure of the welfare commons (2020: 159 *et passim*), a reading that is also advocated by Anders Lustgarten in his dystopian play *If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep* (2013) on the uncommoning and eventual enclosure of the British National Health Service.

Reading the commons not just as an economic, but as a cultural and political endeavour probing the fundamental question of who the British are as a nation, we argue that it provides the affective underpinning to British Toryism and the cultural underpinnings to a politics which manifests in the outsourcing of its responsibilities to the community, as was proposed in the Big Society manifesto and has in fact been implemented by austerity politics. We contend that British Toryism actively seeks to evoke the concept of the village green as the ideal commons, but with a specific agenda in mind, excluding more radical, leftist versions. By performing a rigid notion of the village green that marginalises factors such as class, ethnicity, and gender, this ideal commons ensures the absence of an alternative, potentially influential commons and aligns, to speak with Lauren Berlant, with the imagination and political leanings of reactionary ideologies. It portrays a sanitised public green not truly accessible to everyone, because it has already been enclosed and creates a *locus amoenus*, a space frozen in time and virtually free of the community, stripped of the "inconvenience" of others who might challenge the existing power dynamics (Berlant 2022: 79).

The revival of community volunteering as a neoliberal paradigm and the commons as an affective foundation of British Toryism was invoked in Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's official address at the Coronation of King Charles III and Queen Camilla on 6 May, 2023. The theme of the coronation liturgy was "Called to Serve", and thus, drawing on the biblical Epistle to the Colossians 1:9-17, Sunak emphasised "service to others" as a fundamental attribute of the British monarchy and indeed as a marker for "Britishness", then promoted The Big Help Out, a nationwide volunteering event scheduled for the Monday following the Coronation, proclaiming that "in a fitting tribute to the spirit of service that will define the Carolean Age, people across our country will help their communities with thousands of acts of kindness" (Sunak 2023). Backed by the Together Coalition, which encompasses "thousands of organisations" (M&C Saatchi 2023: 2:34), including an astonishing number of large British and international

companies listed on the stock exchange ("Our Partners" 2023), The Big Help Out campaign is currently recognised as a registered[7] "super-charity" endorsed by the Royal Family and sanctioned by the Church of England, thus tying together the new identity marker of "serving the community" and the coronation of the new head of the Church (cf. "The Big Help Out" 2023; cf. Gloucester Cathedral 2023). We find the commons located here at the interface of religion and politics. There is a pattern of religious engagement, which is made explicit in performance of the commons from the state. This is not so much an attempt to assert a particularly Christian identity for the British state as it is to shore up the communal underpinnings of British democracy, which have been historically associated with religious belonging. The communal affect being performed by these acts of service and evoked by Sunak and the Church are seen as the necessary precursors to democracy, which Habermas referred to as 'what is missing.' This sense of recommoning may be seen as a nostalgic return to a pre-modern Britain, the core of a potential radical egalitarian politics, or simply a spiritual goal that can, with its combination of affective potency and political vagueness, serve as justification and consolation for the harsh and seemingly isolating realities of British life after Brexit and under Tory rule.

Conclusion

In the wake of continued social fragmentation and precarisation, we find, in the country's cultural productions and in its political rhetoric, a notable focus on the commons as the unifying force that binds the British people together, creating a sense of equality where everyone is, supposedly, an integral part of something greater. This emphasis on the community is contrasted with the always-implied enclosure of this very community. Effectively, civic space and the commons are commodified, including by the non-profit and voluntary work as advocated by the Big Society manifesto, the Big Help-Out, and the call to "make volunteering a real feature of the new Carolean age" (M&C Saatchi 2023), and romanticised by mainstream cultural manifestations such as the 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony, *The Great British Bake Off*, and village fêtes. By invoking commoning and the commons, these examples seem to aim at creating a counter-narrative to late capitalism, but we argue they are not inherently or necessarily anti-capitalist. Instead, we propose viewing them as manifestations of a conservative cultural agenda that emerged in the early 2000s and continues to shape the contemporary portrayal of British identity within a neoliberal conservative framework. They are so intertwined with the nostalgic reproduction of an idealised concept that they obscure the actual conservative agenda, which entails a hands-off approach by the

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[7] The Big Help Out is a Registered Charity in England and Wales (no. 1193060; cf. *The Big Help Out* 2023).

state, reliance on community support for the vulnerable, the sick, the elderly, the deserving poor, the communities' crumbling public spaces and dwindling natural resources, and the exploitation of voluntary labour from those who can afford to provide it. This aligns with Caffentzi's observation that the distinctions between capitalist, anticapitalist, and fascist commons can be subtle, contributing to the notion of the commons as "neoliberalism's plan B". Ultimately, we might argue that performative tendency nuances, shapes and even restricts the potential of commoning as an emancipatory and transformative project of social progress and change.

Does this mean the idea of the commons has come to a dead end? Not necessarily. Irina Velicu and Gustavo García-López propose understanding commoning as a relational politics that acknowledges human interconnectedness, vulnerability, and subjectivity (2018: 57). They advocate for social practices that reclaim and sustain the collective reproduction of commons, fostering alternative social relations for a more egalitarian and ecologically conscious society and argue that this understanding can resist neoliberal forms of life and experience, promoting a convivial and communal way of life (58 *et passim*). Their analysis aligns with Lauren Berlant's critical examination of the romanticised commons in contemporary discourse. Highlighting that this romanticisation often emerges from a longing for a harmonious structure that erases differences without confronting the underlying struggle, Berlant instead proposes, as an alternative, viewing the concept of the commons as a tool and a weapon for unlearning the world, "which is key to not reproducing it" (Berlant 2022: 80; cf. also Exner 2021; cf. Meißner 2022). Considered from this perspective, the commons invites us to consider what it means to be a subject, an agent, within a network of power relations, of which we are an active part. It may not offer us a clear politics through which we can solve the differences of today, but *doing* together in the commons—and seeing that being done—may offer us the sense of togetherness that we need in order to discover one.

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