

SCHOOLS AND THE COLLABORATIVE COMMONS

Abstract. *The growing number of social and economic problems highlights the fact that neoliberal ideas are losing their potential to regulate the challenges of today and the future. Analytical insight into discourses on community and collaboration reveals that these ideas are also the structured in education policy and practice. The article presents the ways the idea of the commons is explored and practised in primary education in Slovenia.*

Keywords: *schools, community, collaboration, commons, education*

Introduction

Looking back at the past few decades, we find various authors warning against the rising social and economic inequalities and their consequences (Beck, 2001; Stiglitz, 2012; Sen, 1992). Different reports demonstrate the then barely acceptable reality of inequalities both between so-called developed countries and the rest of the world, as well as within countries (Oxfam, 2019; UNICEF, 2018; PISA, 2018).

Those decades during which the illusion reigned that market mechanisms with less state redistribution and more market competition were able to solve virtually all problems in the economy/societies now seem like a bad joke. Today, half a century after Margaret Thatcher (1987) infamously declared “there is no such thing as society”, the popularity of neoliberal promises among parts of academic communities, political elites and the public is facing a decline. The Post-Growth Conference (2018) – regarded as a landmark conference, as one can read in *The Guardian*¹ – gathered scientists, politicians and EU parliamentarians alongside trade unions and NGOs to explore the possibilities of a “post-growth economy” in Europe. The post-growth movement proposes changes like limits on resource use, progressive taxation to stem the tide of rising inequality, a gradual reduction of working hours, a basic and a minimum income, and the redistribution of

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care work, as well as a correction of the power imbalances that undermine democracy (WGBU Report, 2011).

While it is obvious that we do not have available any alternative functional model for new governmentality (Foucault, 2009; Foucault, 2008), it is more or less clear that today's societies cannot continue based on the old neoliberal paradigm, with the growing greed of the super wealthy few (Oxfam, 2019; Freland, 2013). Egotistic private interests have brought present-day societies, even the planet, to the edge of destruction. March 2019 witnessed historic gatherings of youngsters in almost 3,000 cities around the world, protesting against the destruction of the habitat they will need for their lives in the future.² Different, alternative ideas about the economy and society seem to be in the making, especially since the 2008 financial crises. Several include the idea of collaboration and resulting practices in common. Common and collaboration are believed to counterbalance the risks of the neoliberal market economy centred around competition (Sennett, 2012; Castel, 2012; Rifkin, 2014). However, conceptualisations of the idea of common and collaboration and their implications are far from unified. One possible understanding of common and collaboration is the commons. By the commons, we follow Rifkin (2000; Rifkin, 2014) in framing socio-economic practices as those derived from collaborative efforts involving the sharing of capabilities and goods (also see Thackara, 2017 and Östrom,³ 2012). Rifkin also argues in favour of hybrid, parallel and overlapping ways of living, arguing for comparing and combining the 'old' market-oriented ways and new ways, allowing competition between them. Along with other authors, Rifkin believes we are living in a time of transitions, and that we can already observe shifts, slowly and gradually making way for alternative possibilities, for different rationalities⁴ to emerge.

In the midst of these economic and social changes, shifts are already taking place in specific fields and subfields, such as education. The idea of the commons, community and collaboration, (PISA, 2015; Zeichner, 2018; MacBeath, 2007) is also leading to new possibilities and challenges in the field of education where community is also frequently presented as a solution to individual and social challenges, especially at the individual school level. Interestingly, this is true of both discourses that are critical of

² See Greta (2019) and Greta (2019 a).

³ Elinor Östrom, winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, examined the management of common-pool resources and argued for community management as a "free economy outside the market economy". She argues: "There are certainly very important situations where people can self-organise to manage environmental resources, but we cannot simply say that community is, or is not the best; that the government is, or is not the best; or that the market is, or is not, the best. It all depends on the nature of the problem that we are trying to solve" (2012: 70).

⁴ Weber (1978).

neoliberal regulations in education, and discourses that still favour the old rationality of the liberating powers of the free market economy (Zeichner, 2018: x).

It nevertheless seems that, in schools and in society, we face a challenge of understanding. There is a need to question and test dominant ideas, to challenge and shift what has become commonplace and common sense in order to make way for the 'new'. In Bourdieu's words:

To change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced. (Bourdieu, 1989: 23)

In these changing times, we can observe a growing number of community and collaborative practices (Castells, 2012; Thackara, 2017) and attempts to articulate and frame new ways of perception, conception, discourse and practice. These reveal a disperse, fragmented set of regulative ideas, sometimes overlapping and reinforcing one another, but other times profoundly different. Sustainability, the third social movement, the third sector, the social and solidarity economy, the post-growth economy, the living economy, the circular economy (e.g. Thackara, 2017; Rifkin, 2014) are just some of the presentations of what we can thematise as liberal attempts at regulation that draw on and continue to develop the idea of community and collaboration. No doubt, as Sennett (2012) accurately points out, the ideas of community and collaboration are alarmingly popular among the non-liberal, mainly extreme right-wing and neo-conservative parts of the political spectrum.⁵ While important, this is deliberately not part of the focus of this paper.

The aim of this article is to contribute to discussions on the potential and limits of the commons rationality in the field of education.

The first part offers a sociological overview of the structuring of the idea of community, collaboration and the commons, with an emphasis on the way these interrelate with the contemporary profit-based economy. The second part brings a discursive analysis of the structuring and practice of these ideas in education while also presenting such an attempt in Slovenian elementary schools.

⁵ So-called "us against them" – à la America First, rise-wired etc. – must be considered in parallel with an awareness of the dangers of extreme individualism of the neoliberal type because it is obvious that blind tribalism easily "couples solidarity with others like yourself to aggression against those who differ" (Sennett, 2012: 3).

Social challenges, community, collaboration and the commons

At the turn of the twentieth century, community was understood as a set of moral bonds between individuals fragmented by the division of labour and capitalist production. These bonds needed to be reassembled in a social form through a politics of solidarism and social rights (e.g. Durkheim, 1997; Dewey, 1997). Community and community studies from that time in the USA (Addams, 2012), and even more so in the UK after the Second World War, aimed to repair the anomie created by economic shifts in traditionally working-class neighbourhoods, which continued to be accompanied by flows of economic migrants. In times of the welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s, the regulative idea of community again followed different goals by forming a functioning network of professional institutions and services for social citizens (Rose, 2004). Following Rose (2004):

The theme of loss of community and the need to remake community or substitute something for its benefits emerges with remarkable regularity in critical reflections on the state of the nation from the 19th century onwards. From the familiar nineteenth-century tales of the loss of tradition and the rise of individualism in the shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft,⁶ through the analyses of the damaging effects of metropolitan life in the 1920s and 1930s, to the community studies of the 1950s, sociologist, moralists, politicians and pamphleteers rehearse similar themes. (ibid.: 172)

The 1990s first introduced community of the third sector, the commons (e.g. Rifkin, 1995). Rifkin's understanding of the commons as socio-economic practices derived from collaborative efforts involving the sharing of capabilities and goods emerged by building on the aforementioned understandings of community, combining them, using territories and local entities, but overcoming the exclusiveness of geographical space. Moreover, as the author argues (ibid.), an overall shift is taking place in connection with technological advances and possibilities (the Internet of Things) and the reality of the third industrial (technological) revolution.

Schools have always been part of these shifts. As social, political and economic movements shifted, the aims and purpose of education⁷ nonetheless remained inherently the same, but with profoundly different and

⁶ Tönnies (1999).

⁷ Biesta (2010; Biesta, 2013) argues there are at least three domains in which education can function and through which educational purposes can be articulated. One is the domain of qualification, which has to do with knowledge, values, dispositions and skills. The second is socialisation, which involves the way we, as individuals, become part of existing traditions. The third is the domain of subjectification, of

complex social and personal outcomes. Durkheim's question concerning the relationship between the individual and the social in education is still very much alive today (Durkheim, 1997).

Contemporary education is thus challenged by the social and economic shifts mentioned above. The commons, drawing on community and collaboration, presents itself as one of the possible, hybrid ways (Rifkin, 1995) of understanding and responding to the risks the neoliberal market economy is producing in education, among other areas. We briefly outline some of these risks.

In their book *Does Capitalism Have a Future?*, Wallenstein, Collins, Mann, Derlugian and Calhoun (2013) discuss the question posed in the title. They believe we are witnessing a systemic crisis of capitalism, and that this crisis might contribute to a loosening of existing structural limitations, which are a legacy of past dilemmas and institutional settings. In education, Collins (2013) recognises the impact of the structural crises of contemporary society and the economy, based on technological dislodgement and an exclusive understanding of education as a precondition for a thriving labour market. He shows how, in the past, capitalism avoided the crises of technological advances by using five emergency exits, one of which is the prolongation of educational attainment. He problematises the latter in relation to rising educational criteria demanded by the labour market. One of the 'negative' consequences of rising attainment is the devaluation of degrees, but Collins also warns against differences in the quality of education and the disinterest of students resulting from the narrow interest in credentials, the inflation of grades, etc. Collins is not alone in his critiques.⁸ The argument put forth is complex, concerning shifts in the relationship between education, the economy and society. He believes that we, as a society, are not properly addressing the 'problem' of technological dislodgement. In relation to technology, educational attainment alone cannot produce more equal opportunities with respect to the labour market (Collins, 2013; Fray and Osbourne, 2013).

Parallel to the challenges to personal and collective security based exclusively on employment and economic capital, education and society are

the subjectivity of those whom we educate, which is associated with emancipation and freedom, as well as the responsibility that comes from such freedom (Biesta, 2013: 4).

⁸ *Biesta (2010; 2013) and Apple's (2013) contributions shed light on the value aspect of today's instrumentalised education. Alvesson (2014; Alvesson 2016), for example, claims that contemporary education is marked by grandiosity, illusion tricks used to position educational institutions and study programmes in relation to labour market needs, consumerism and the type of subjectivity and practice it forms. He demonstrates how contemporary organisational structures and personal aspirations (2014/2016) add to the production of what he defines as functional stupidity: "Functional stupidity is [the] inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways. It involves a lack of reflexivity, a disinclination to require or provide justification, and avoidance of substantive reasoning" (2014: 216).*

challenged by the regulating of the relations between the social and the individual. Prevailing practices oriented to individual gains, profits and commodification (Skidelsky, 2012) have loosened the individual's responsibility towards others and towards the social (Beck, 2001; Beck, 2009). Beck critically points to the systemic conditions that are pushing individuals into more and more individualised forms of existence. Together with the problem of growing economic insecurity, this results in the decomposition of culturally established forms of coexistence and collaboration, leading to the individualisation of social inequalities (2001).⁹

Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu, 1992a; Bourdieu, 1999) argues that the regulation of education according to the rationality of the contemporary economy is producing an understanding of individualism as the triumph of freedom over the burdens of social bonds. The only bond that still remains accepted as rational is the relationship between individuals, profits and wage labour.

Building on Bourdieu's argument, we do not claim that this is the only rationality in education, although it does seem to be the prevailing rationality in the sense that it orients the practices of schooling (teaching, learning) towards explicit goals: sustaining the competitive, free labour market economy and, in this context, the social relations (individual and collective possibilities and aspirations) that it implies. The long-term question is probably what education (in terms of processes and outcomes) will be able to offer to the increasing number of highly educated individuals with respect to the aforementioned personal and collective challenges, especially if the normative aspiration of full-time employment is no longer sustainable.¹⁰ This paper follows this consideration, but is less ambitious. It provides a sketch, an initial insight into the possibilities of the commons in education and schools, and into the ways community and collaboration can help address the rising social challenges of the post-market economy.

Community and collaboration in education

We believe the emergence of community and collaboration in liberal discourses offers a parallel insight into the dominant structures and practices of regulation. Uncovering principles that are taken for granted, simple ideas regarding ways of living, opens up new connections, new possibilities for (re)arranging the old and new objective and subjective aspirations for the future. Discussing the effects of habitus, Bourdieu states:

⁹ *The latter also implies the conversion of social risk into psychological dispositions: personal dissatisfaction, self-blame, self-shame, conflicts etc. (2001: 145; Sennett, 1992; 1996; 2006; Bauman, 2002).*

¹⁰ *Fray and Osbourne (2013).*

One of the fundamental effects of the harmony between practical sense and objectified meaning (sens) is the production of a common-sense world, whose immediate self-evidence is accompanied by the objectivity provided by consensus on the meaning of practices and the world /.../. (Bourdieu, 1992b: 58)

Common sense is therefore understood as a stock of self-evidences shared by the majority, ensuring consensus on the shared (common) meanings of the world. These are most powerful while acting spontaneously, to regulate individual and social practices exclusively by gravitating back to profits and to the labour market.¹¹

For example, in *A European Agenda for the Collaborative Economy* (2016) we read:

The collaborative economy creates new opportunities for consumers and entrepreneurs. The Commission considers that it can therefore make an important contribution to jobs and growth in the European Union, if encouraged and developed in a responsible manner. (2016: 2)

Addressing collaborative problem-solving, PISA (2015) also starts off by framing collaboration relative to the workplace.

Today's workplaces demand people who can solve problems in concert with others. But collaboration poses potential challenges to team members. Labour might not be divided equitably or efficiently, with team members perhaps working on tasks they are unsuited for or dislike. Conflict may arise among team members, hindering the development of creative solutions. Thus, collaboration is a skill in itself. (2015: 17)

However, the same data also show that disadvantaged students see the value of teamwork more clearly than their advantaged peers. PISA continues by highlighting that

schools that succeed in building on those attitudes by designing collaborative working environments might be able to engage disadvantaged students in new ways

and that exposure to diversity in the classroom tends to be associated

¹¹ We do not attempt to argue that the relation of school to the labour market is not an important part of education, but it is not the only one.

with better collaboration skills. This also applies to collaboration¹² beyond the school gate: between schools, with parents etc. The report concludes:

In sum, in a world that places a growing premium on social skills, a lot more needs to be done to foster those skills far more systematically across school curriculum. (ibid.)

Leaving aside the needs of the labour market, it seems reasonable and necessary to translate this into other social challenges, deriving from the differences in positions and tendencies for managing insecurities and risks.

In this light, some contemporary contributions to such educational challenges have already been made. Fullan and colleagues (2018) introduce deep learning as an educational innovation. They start from 6Cs, six global competencies – character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking – which they believe change learning by focusing on personally and collectively meaningful matters (2018: xiii). In addition, the authors believe:

What is interesting is that a new set of crises is forcing humankind to reconsider its relationship to each other and to the planet and universe. The circumstances that now face us represent a unique configuration of challenges that make it essential that we proactively change the world through learning. (ibid.: xv)

The deep learning movement, as the authors define it, uses collaboration and community; it is not driven by policy and top management, but located between the “middle” (in localities, districts and municipalities) and the “bottom” (students, teachers, schools etc.) (ibid.). The authors also suggest the need to revise the trends of growing inequality, which partly relates to the loss of schooling’s relevance and meaning.

Another push factor making schooling seem less relevant is that the future job market is not only unpredictable but also in decline as the rise of robots takes toll in the number of jobs that will be available. /.../. All this is further reinforced for students from poverty minorities who feel a growing sense of hopelessness, because they find little sense of belonging in an institution that seems both irrelevant and uncaring. (Fullan et al., 2018: 3)

¹² Collaboration in this light comes close to commonification (Procomuns, 2016), which is a way of organising structure and practice to allow citizens, students, individuals and groups to provide solutions in a self-organised and decentralised manner, with the principles and shared rules of an operational community, shared ownership of assets and capabilities (ibid.).

On top of concerning teaching and learning, these challenges also relate to teacher education. Zeichner (2013) explicitly argues in favour of socially conscious teacher education programmes. He believes that teachers and teaching must be connected to the realities of real people in real schools, and be equitable and workable. He therefore argues for more community-based and democratic approaches. This idea is a response to current trends in the USA showing the aforementioned complexity and diversity of interest in community and collaboration.¹³ One of Zeichner's concerns is the deprofessionalisation of teachers. He is critical of the trend towards shifting teacher education from universities to other forms (courses, programmes etc.) based on the argument of efficacy, i.e. by focusing on specific community needs while preparing teachers for efficient work in specific school districts. In this case, the preparation of teachers uses the notion of community and community needs while reinforcing a competitive market. This nonetheless opens up the importance of understanding and working with communities (Zeichner, 2013: 223–229).¹⁴

In this context, the aforementioned cases seem to imply that the regulative ideas of community and collaboration can serve as an invitation (to schools, teachers, students, parents, local communities) to understand and (re)shape the possibilities of community, collaboration and the commons on (at least) three educational levels: knowledge and curricula, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2010; Biesta, 2013).

A Slovenian story in the making: Schools as community and collaborating schools?

Different national and local contexts shape the attempts and possibilities to respond to and adapt the role of schools in times of transition (Gaber et al., 2016). In so doing, schools also increasingly collaborate with other partners – various institutions with shared interests, local governments etc. – in an effort to tackle social and economic challenges.

The idea is neither entirely new nor unique; it builds on a variety of changes, interventions and disruptions from the past in order to form new connections and transition to the new. The concept of school and community collaboration is rooted in Jane Addams and John Dewey's work in the

¹³ *The growing socioeconomic issues in districts and communities across the USA has, among other things, given rise to the rationale that teachers prepared through alternative routes would be better equipped and do a better job of teaching, stay longer in the job etc. Teacher preparation in the USA is shaping up to become a new opportunity for entrepreneurs. Foundations are already actively attracting attention from entrepreneurs looking to break the "monopoly" of university teacher preparation programmes (Zeichner, 2013: 6–7).*

¹⁴ *As the author shows, however, there are different possible relations between teachers, families and community: from basic PTA meetings and family-teacher conferences, through different types of community engagement and mentorship, to broader concepts of addressing structural inequalities (Zeichner, 2013: 223–229).*

USA at the start of the twentieth century. We can follow different traditions, forms and practices, such as the aforementioned community schools in the USA and the UK, full-service schools in Canada, and *breede school* in the Netherlands (Gaber et al., 2016). The underlying idea of these forms and practices of community and collaboration as the commons (Rifkin, 2014) is to offer a hybrid approach to schools as spaces for work preparation and competition by building up capacities of collaborative and sharing communities for tackling different issues of social justice, equity and equality, thereby mitigating discomforts the market economy, despite promises, is unable to fix.

These models have supported efforts to rethink different, parallel and hybrid rationalities on the level of school practices in Slovenia. One opportunity arose when the Ministry of Education issued a public call for an ESF-funded project for conceptualising entrepreneurship in Slovenian primary education (ISCED 1–2).

Slovenia's National Education Institute is coordinating the project along with two university faculties and a network of public institutions from the field of education and economics, as well as NGOs from various fields of expertise. Thirty developmental schools (school teams and school directors/headmasters) are involved in conceptualisations of sustainable community and collaboration. Another 120 schools will be included as implementation schools in the second year of the project. The formal acronym of the project is POGUM (see POGUM), which means "courage" (2017–2021). Its aim is to conceptualise and develop entrepreneurship in primary education in Slovenia (also see Entrecomp, 2016). The prevailing rationality of entrepreneurship in Slovenia has shown to be too narrow with respect to the predicted future needs of the population that is currently in primary school. In practice, taking the values related to primary schools in Slovenia into account, this has resulted in outlining different lines/axes of practice, some of which remain partly framed by old rationalities, while others attempt to conceptualise entrepreneurship along the lines of social innovations. All of the practices, however, encourage interconnections between them.

As part of the project activities, we present one of the hybrid attempts to address the mentioned challenges by placing schools as institutions (as physical and symbolic spaces) at the centre of local communities.¹⁵ Since this is an ongoing activity, the main challenge is twofold: how to collect, include and possibly upgrade existing practices in schools following the logic of the commons (community, collaboration, sharing and access) in

¹⁵ *In Slovenia, the national network of public primary schools makes them the most frequently present public institution at the local community level. This means that, compared to other public institutions, schools have a favourable position in terms of sensitivity towards local community needs, as well as in terms of their aims and the number of employees.*

local environments, and how to encourage the facilitation of such practices where they do not yet exist.

At the beginning of the project, a study of the existing activities in schools was conducted. A questionnaire was sent to the principals of 30 elementary schools in different regions and in various urban, semi-urban and rural local environments, with the aim of gathering information about existing practices of community and collaboration in order to offer schools guidance and support in their aspirations. This helped the schools evaluate existing conditions in which the schools could develop the commons as well as the collecting of initial suggestions for structural and formal changes at the systemic level. The social and personal challenges related to the extreme individualisation and economisation of an ever-wider set of interpersonal practices have given rise to questions regarding how schools can contribute to communities by establishing a network of agents and practices in local environments, thus adding to development of the commons.

In answering this challenge, we are currently intensively working with six schools, conceptualising and developing the possibilities related to schools as centres of society.¹⁶ These developmental schools will help pilot the implemented ideas and guide approximately 30 other schools towards developing their own practices and models of schools as the commons in the period from 2019 to 2021.

As mentioned, the schools were asked to scan their population and local environment needs and map their existing practices in an attempt to tackle social issues in a broad sense. Supported by the partner institutions involved in the project, these practices build on established curricular goals and bridge to extended curricula activities, as well as establishing links with the needs of the local environment, cooperating with local actors, municipalities, and local businesses and institutions. Different sets of goals are addressed through school activities, such as the collaboration of different actors, equal opportunities, intergenerational collaboration, developing responsibility, sharing and redistribution, and cross-curricular activities.

One school, for example, is planning to strengthen intercultural dialogue. It has a large and growing number of migrant students and parents and is therefore planning, among other practices, to develop an information point at the school to help with the formal and informal aspects of inclusion (parents helping parents, family networking, and peer-to-peer help). For instance, it is planned to develop a multilingual school webpage so that information can be understood by parents who do not yet speak Slovenian (School activity plans). Another school has already prepared an exchange

¹⁶ Other developmental schools are working on different but complementary issues, such as the sustainable environment (natural and manmade), culture and inclusion, technology, career orientation etc.

fair for students at which items such as clothes, toys and sports equipment can be exchanged. This will hopefully guide the students in the direction of sharing, helping those who are less fortunate and towards a life of less consumerism (Schools activity plans). Two schools are planning camping trips with an elaborate set of activities combining school learning and survival techniques, entailing active collaboration amongst students, teachers, parents and local actors like fire fighters, army, paramedics etc. The whole school spends 2 to 3 days combining curricula and other school activities in the wild (School activity plans). Some schools are also building outdoor classrooms and cultivating their own vegetable gardens, sharing knowledge between seniors and students, offering school facilities for community gatherings etc. (School activity plans).

Conclusion

The above-mentioned social and economic challenges offer fertile soil for making shifts in individual and collective practices leading towards Rifkin's ideal of the commons (1995; 2014). The insights into sociological problematisations of contemporary society found in the literature show that ideas of the commons, community and collaboration are re-emerging as a possible solution to those problems. Analytical insight shows how these ideas are structured in education and the related efforts and interest, with an emphasis on Slovenian primary schools. Nevertheless, these findings call for further research and analysis of the processes at the national and local level in Slovenia, as well as in international policy and practice.

This highlights the fact that, following Bourdieu, the social world may be uttered and constructed in various ways according to different principles of vision and division (1989: 19). Further, various social, economic and educational mechanisms act differently to produce the common world and structure schemes of perception and appreciation. Schools can and do act as a space of conditions and conditionings, co-producing a common world – that is, a minimum of consensus on the social world within the realm of a plurality of visions that therefore forms of individual and collective habitus¹⁷ – as a world in common. The process is, however, twofold. Social reality holds a specific meaning and relevance for individuals and groups belonging to similar conditions and conditionings. Living, acting and thinking becomes a series of common-sense constructs that act as preselected and pre-interpreted schemes with which the realities of daily lives are experienced. These representations, Bourdieu argues, must be considered, especially while attempting to account for the daily struggles – individual and

¹⁷ Bourdieu (1992b: 53).

collective – that purport to transform or preserve these structures (1989: 14–15).

In light of the above, the idea of the commons seems to offer a basis for understanding the objective conditions inscribed in individual and collective practices. It also helps understand how to live together in a world of plurality and difference, and as part of a sustainable relationship with our natural environment.

It is safe to say the idea of the commons is an idea that will continue to develop and (trans)form educational practices. Different attempts to regulate community and collaboration in education in the future will continue to produce opportunities and agencies, enabling various combinations, with the possibility of reducing individual and collective risks in times of social and economic transitions. Schools as the commons is one of them.

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