The future looks bleak.” It would be difficult for any reader, of any social/political orientation, to read these opening words from Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval and not nod, even if only reluctantly, in agreement. If, however, the casual reader is able to gloss over this opening line without being immediately compelled to recognize the gravity of what is to come, in the second paragraph of the text Dardot and Laval issue a second, more immediate and urgent reminder, of the gravity of the moment within and against which they are writing: “The situation in which humanity finds itself is becoming increasingly intolerable.”¹ Such propositions are easy to promulgate, (again) regardless of social/political orientation, and there is no shortage of material with which such propositions may be abundantly and exhaustingly supported. Fortunately for readers of Common, Dardot and Laval are far less interested in proving their characterization of the present moment, and far more

¹ This import of this proclamation is certainly not lost on Imre Szeman, whose Preface to the text both begins and ends with the observation that “The world is a disaster” (see pp. x, xv).
interested in exploring the possibilities for new, communal ways of being in this world toward the resolution of the “crises and disasters” that characterize human existence in the twenty-first century. This new way of being is developed through the authors’ [re-]formulation of the meaning of common.

Dardot and Laval lay much of the blame for our current world problems on capitalism, noting from the outset that “[c]apitalism continues to deploy its relentless logic despite the almost daily evidence of its profound inability to proffer even the slightest solution to the various crises and disasters it creates” (1). Yet the authors are not content to identify ‘capitalism’ proper as the lone bogey responsible for our predicament, and they go to great lengths to emphasize the role of neoliberalism, particularly over the last three or four decades, in further legitimizing the primacy of capitalism as a world-wide social and political force. In any case, Dardot and Laval contend that what is necessary is to cultivate “a new way of challenging capitalism and imagining its transcendence.” The authors introduce their conception of common as

the concrete product of social movements and various schools of thought dedicated to opposing the dominant tendency of our era, namely the extension of private appropriation into every sphere of our societies, our cultures, our very lives. (5)

The common is thus “a means of opening up a new path” toward the desired transcendence of the capitalistic structure of human life, both socially and politically.² Interestingly, while noting the direness of the current situation and the need for radical, organized, communal efforts to achieve a new path, the authors acknowledge that efforts toward realizing such new paths have already begun throughout the world. Thus the authors posit as a parallel aim of their text to “show the political principle of the common already at work across a range of contemporary political movements, struggles, and discourses that are opposing the hegemony of neoliberal rationality across the globe” (6).

² The authors’ use of “political” echoes that of countryman Alain Badiou, who defined politics as “all the processes by means of which human collectivity becomes active or proves capable of new possibilities as regards its own destiny.” (Alain Badiou, Philosophy and the Event, trans. Louise Burchill [Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013], 5.)
Before beginning their investigation in earnest, the authors present an “Archaeology of the Common” to identify the historical origins of the concept of the common; with this opening analysis, they hope to define both what common means as well as what it does not, toward situating the concept as they intend to develop it. They began by identifying the Latin and Greek roots of the word itself, thereby revealing meanings of shared reciprocal obligation and recognition (from the Latin munus and subsequently cum-munus or mis en commune) and responsible, shared participation in defining and fostering just action for the city (from the Greek koinón and koinônein). For Dardot and Laval, these etymological origins reveal a core element of their unique conception of the term by “mak[ing] the practice of ‘sharing in common’ the basic pre-condition for every common, in both its normative and affective dimensions” (11). The authors then note that historical explications tend to couch the discussion in terms of some kind of “common good” that is understood, implicitly or explicitly, as the “common heritage of all humanity.” They discuss specific manners of articulating the meaning of common, categorizing such articulations as theological (i.e., positing the common as the “highest end of our political and religious institutions”), juridical (i.e., using the term common primarily as a classification for material goods), and philosophical (i.e., defining common with respect to the universal, or “that which is common to all”). Ultimately, although Dardot and Laval may find important or useful aspects of each of the various historical attempts at defining common, all such attempts fail to fully get at the conception which they are attempting to develop; and this not necessarily for the content of each definition, but rather for the way itself in which each attempts to identify common with qualities of judgment. In opposition to this, the authors contend that a conception of common that is to be meaningful and useful against our contemporary global situation must entail an element of action:

*Only practical activity* can make the common, just as it is only practical activity that can produce a new collective subject. … *The common is not a good*…because the common is not an object of the will, whether as a possession or as that which is constituted by the will. The common (singular) is a political principle through which we are able to build the commons, maintain the
commons, and sustain the commons. It is, as such, a political principle that defines a new system of struggles on a global scale. (28)

For Dardot and Laval, what *common* means is answered as much with respect to praxis as to definition. Similar to Gadamer’s description of the hermeneutic experience of *truth*, which states that in the play of language, the elements-in-relation interact in a dialectical dynamic of question and answer, forming the dialogue which constitutes their relation and which ultimately reveals the *truth* of that relation, Dardot and Laval seem to be suggesting that a true understanding of the meaning of *common* must be an *evolving* understanding, which can only fully be realized through the active and equal engagement (praxis) of everyone.4

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In Part I of the text, “The Emergence of the Common,” Dardot and Laval examine the specific conditions from which the new understanding of *common* has risen and critique various contemporary definitions of the concept that have been offered. As they authors note at the outset, “[t]he principle of the common emerged out of various democratic struggles and social movements at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It’s emergence signals

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3 In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer states: “What we mean by truth here can best be defined again in terms of our concept of *play*. The weight of the things we encounter in understanding plays itself out in a linguistic event, a play of words playing around and about what is meant. *Language games* exist where we, as learners... rise to the understanding of the world... The analogue in the present case is neither playing with language nor with the contents of the experience of the world or of tradition that speaks to us, but the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills its answer.” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Continuum, 1989, 2004], 483–484).

4 In a brief essay for *transform! europe*, Dardot and Laval explicitly emphasize the evolving character of the common: “the fuller definition we present...does not claim to be universal, trans-historic, and independent of temporal and geographic conditions. In etymological terms...the intention is certainly not to suggest that common always carried the same meaning it does today.” See https://www.transform-network.net/es/publications/anuario/overview/article/yearbook-2016/the-common-an-essay-on-the-21st-century-revolution/
a new era of emancipation” (31). With Part I, Dardot and Laval attempt to comprehensively present the context of this contemporary emergence and to identify the ways in which this emergence has contributed to a useful and meaningful overarching definition of common; as they explicitly state, “the series of genealogies and analyses offered in Part I…thus have a singular purpose: to clear a path for the new theory of the common we take up in Part 2” (33).

The authors begin by discussing several historical communist models which, in the authors’ estimation, ultimately served to repress the common (Chapter 2). They identify three main communistic ideologies—progressing from a conception of the “supreme value of the community” defined by unity and equality, through an evolution of “community” to “society” understood for its capability toward organizing itself, and finally to single-party rule over all aspects of society. Through this particular historical analysis, Dardot and Laval hope to separate the chaff from the wheat in the ways in which the meaning of common has been understood and used by communistic ideologies, ultimately to demonstrate that “the common…cannot be thought of as an original state to be restored, nor something that spontaneously emerges out of the process of production, nor something that is imposed from the outside, from above” (57). Rather, the common must be established, defined, and continually refined through shared, organized, communal action. In this sense, the common (as commoning) is perhaps analogous to Alain Badiou’s conception of the event:

An event is something that brings to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable. An event is not by itself the creation of a reality; it is the creation of a possibility, it opens up a possibility. It indicates to us that a possibility exists that has been ignored…. Everything depends on the way in which the possibility proposed by the event is grasped, elaborated, incorporated, and set out in the world.\footnote{Badiou, 5.}

In each case, the conception of the entity itself (common or event) is only as important as the manner in which the entity is formulated, questioned, and ultimately realized (made real) in the world.
In Chapter 3, the authors present a new manner in which the struggle against global capitalism has been undertaken as a response to more contemporary appearances of neoliberal capitalism. Further, the authors contend that it is in this particular struggle, against neoliberalism, that the conception in question evolves from a reference to “commons” to “the common.” Building on this notion, Chapter 4 centers around a substantive discussion of Elinor Ostrom’s foundational work toward developing a theory of the commons. While noting the profound importance of Ostrom’s work, the authors ask whether a “new theoretical approach,” based in part on Ostrom’s conclusions, should be sought. To complete this trajectory of investigation, Dardot and Laval turn to the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Chapter 5), who themselves had undertaken the same theoretical shift from defining the commons to defining the common, noting the ways in which Hardt and Negri succeeded but also where more work needs to be done to fully achieve a meaningful and useful definition of the common.

In Part II, “Law and the Institution of the Common,” Dardot and Laval more fully clarify their meaning of common by discussing it within the context of institutions and the law, noting that, historically (even recently historically) speaking, “the common is first and foremost a matter of law, and therefore a determination of what must be” (155). The authors’ primary goal in Part II is to demonstrate that, for their view of the common to become a meaningful and practical reality, the common must be asserted “as the principle of a new law” that would compel an overthrow of our historical conceptions of property.

The authors begin by presenting a “genealogy of the law of property” to reveal the relatively recent origins of our current conceptions of property rights (Chapter 6). Building on this demonstration, they further contend that, because Anglo-Saxon “common law” is fundamentally formulated in deference to private property, it cannot therefore form a meaningful basis for the new law of the common (Chapter 7). To begin to more fully articulate the new law of the common, the authors first insist that law must be a “law of the poor against the law of the privileged” (Chapter 8), additionally noting that the new conditions within which more and more people live and work are necessitating, just as conditions resulting from the emergence of guilds and unions had at the end of the nineteenth century, that the new law of the common entail a new understanding of institutionalization (Chapter 9). Their
notion of what institutionalizing can mean for the common is more fully explicated in Chapter 10, wherein the authors introduce their concept of *instituent praxis*. As they note, because what is needed is the “creation of new use rights that impose limits on private property and even begin to rescind the institution of private property itself through the recognition of unappropriability as a hegemonic social norm,” the authors turn their attention to imagining the kinds of rules that may not only overturn historical customs but may also grow to become customs themselves over time. These rules cannot be wholly created anew; rather, they must arise from within the needs and conditions that define the current situation. This is *instituent praxis*: the constant (and constantly evolving) work that privileges the *instituting* over the *institution*, realizing the necessary relatedness between both the *why* and the *how* of social and political action:

> [For those who engage in instituent praxis], it is from the very moment in which they refuse to separate the ends of their activity from the relations they have created amongst themselves in order to carry this activity that the forms of reflection on and modes of intervening in the institution they have themselves created provide the values and meaning that...guide their collective efforts. (309)

Instituent praxis, despite its aim to fundamentally reshape existing institutions, must occur from within, and with a certain regard for the institutions themselves, provided that each institutions is “open to its history, ...open to everything that functions as its institutional unconscious.”

Finally, in Part III, “Nine Political Propositions,” Dardot and Laval present a possible outline of a manner in which the “politics of the common” might be realized. Re-emphasizing that their conception of the common is a political principle, the authors reiterate the necessity of *instituent praxis* as the means by which new institutions may be invented to effectively combat “political dictatorship and neoliberal capitalism” (311). Remaining true to their insistence on the creativity and evolvability of new laws of the common, the authors articulate nine “theoretical and practical propositions,” not as definitive accounts of what *should* be done but rather as possibilities of what *might* be done; these propositions are
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explicitly offered to “invite reflection and, above all, intellectual and practical collaboration” (312).

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In their introduction to Common, while describing the kinds of challenges that define collective human existence in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval posit our collective failure to recognize these challenges as our common human destiny as perhaps the greatest crisis of all. With this failure, we are living the “tragedy of the non-common” (3). If we accept the authors’ repeated contention that our present and future are profoundly bleak, we must equally recognize that a new way of engaging our present and future in common is required. This new way of engaging is precisely what Dardot and Laval offer under the name the common—the political principle that informs the collaborative, deliberative activity whereby new customs and institutions may be formed to transcend the social and political conditions threatening humanity and our world itself.

The concerns and questions directing Common are not new. As noted above, Alain Badiou posed very similar questions in his analysis of the event as the entity that catalyzes societal progress:

Is there really, strategically, a vision or possibility of organizing the human collectivity that is radically different from that which exists today? … It is a question of whether or not an authentic global alternative exists as regards the destiny of human history. 6

Yet the absence of novelty in the questions themselves does nothing to diminish the relevance, in fact the urgency, of the present work. The fact alone that such questions remain unanswered should be sufficient to qualify the profound importance of Dardot and Laval’s work. Yet even if the precise notion of common developed here, or the proposed manner of its realization, may not ultimately be attained, the authors have given contemporary readers (and citizens!) an engaging and informative picture of how the social and political challenges facing our collective existence may be engaged, meaningfully and effectively.

6 Ibid, 36.