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Collective Subjectivation in Socially Innovative Commoning

REVIEW ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on subjectivities of agents involved in socially innovative commoning practices. Social change agents, often influenced by neoliberal ideologies and individualist subjectivities, sometimes prioritize 'practical' approaches over approaches addressing the complexity of social relations and ethics in commoning; this can unintentionally undermine collective efforts, reinforcing the very systems these initiatives seek to dismantle. Responding to insights from our four-year large-scale research project on commoning, the paper proposes the groundwork for examining subjectivities and subjectivation processes within socially innovative commoning. It draws from an open definition of subjectivity volunteered by the psychologist Fernando González Rey, highlighting how subjectivity of actors is deeply intertwined with cultural, historical, and social contexts. It addresses individual and social subjectivation, showing how collective subjectivity is formed through their interaction. Collective subjectivation is staged by drawing from three literatures that give attention to the role of subjectivity and subjectivation in social and political action: political ecology (emotional and performative experiences of subjects as driving forces for the politics of resistance), ecofeminism (understanding affective and communicative social relations among humans and between humans and more-than-humans in everyday experiences), and anarchism (exploring the interplay between individual freedom and social cooperation in reimagining the political subject and community building). Collective subjectivation involves re-imagining and re-building social relations on the grounds of solidarity in opposition to dominant individualist mindsets, engaging in human-nature interactions, and integrating personal emotions, affective dimensions, and psychoanalytic insights to stimulate new collective practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on subjectivities[1] of people – actors and especially social change agents – involved in socially innovative and commoning practices. It addresses a critical concern: social change agents and (action) researchers are often unprepared – that is, lacking the necessary knowledge, skills, emotional readiness, or ethical robustness – in dealing with the intricate ethical and psychological dimensions of building new social relations inherent in commoning practices. The paper develops the theoretical foundations for a framework to more deeply examine subjectivities and subjectivation processes within socially innovative commoning. It addresses the following key questions: How are subjectivities formed in socially innovative commoning processes? How might they be re-formed through collective resubjectivation, socio-ecological experiences, and therapeutic approaches? To address these questions, we define and theorize subjectivity, exploring how collective subjectivity emerges from the interplay between individual and social subjectivation. We then engage with three streams of literature, which we argue serve as valuable grounds for theoretical reflection with deep practical implications for reimagining social relations and social change agency. In doing so, this paper seeks to contribute to contemporary debates on socio-political transformation by engaging with the specific dynamics of their collective action.

In this paper, we use the term socially innovative commoning to encompass both commoning and socially innovative initiatives. By commoning, we mainly refer to the process through which social relations and collective agency take material form—essentially, the building of a community around shared resources or practices. Social innovation, on the other hand, focuses on (re)constructing social relations within a community, emphasizing the ethics of mutual aid and deep interpersonal respect (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019). Section 2 sets the context for this paper by providing a brief overview of the factors that contribute to entrenched individualist norms and mindsets, highlighting the relevancy of understanding subjectivity within commoning research. In Section 3, rather than working with a pre-set definition of 'subject' and 'subjectivation' we build on an open definition of subjectivity volunteered by the psychologist and theorist Fernando González Rey (2007, 2017), which we suggest is highly applicable to studies of the role of subjectivity in socially innovative agency and commoning. Using González Rey's framework, we emphasize how subjectivity is deeply intertwined with cultural, historical, and social contexts and that it has a generative potential. We shed a critical eye on the concepts of collective and political subjectivation, which too easily overlook the historical and cultural path dependency of subjectivity formation, and briefly dwell on the role of symbolic frameworks in subjectivation processes.

In Section 4, we draw on the few literatures that connect subjectivation to social change agency and that explore the relationship between the building of a commons, (re) production of social relations, and human subjectivities. We observe how political ecology, eco-feminist, and anarchist approaches to the (re)production of social relations regard the delicacy of socially innovative collective subjectivity, considered essential for the development of mutual aid ethics in social relations. We use González Rey's concepts to untwine the formation of collective subjectivity as a hybrid between individual and social subjectivation, driven by an ethics and practice of mutual aid as applied in social innovation. We consider mutual aid as a practice and ethics reproduced in osmosis between humans and nature (Kropotkin [1902] 2006). This means focusing on satisfying alienated human needs, (re)building social relations based on mutuality and solidarity, and socio-political mobilization pursuing social equality (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019). We conclude (Section 5) by examining how this framework can contribute to fostering collective subjectivity in socially innovative commoning practices.

2. BACKDROP: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF SUBJECTIVITIES IN REBUILDING SOCIAL RELATIONS AND CHANGE AGENCY

The multifaceted nature of agency in socially innovative commoning embodies a myriad of often contradictory ethical values, intertwined with the formation and embedding of social relations. This complexity is reflected in the diverse individual and social subjectivities of activists, which frequently oscillate between individualism and collectivism. Fostering genuine collective subjectivity in socially innovative commoning processes is fraught with challenges, shaped by factors that intertwine ethical values, relational dynamics, and ideological influences affecting mental frameworks influencing agency. In this section, we provide a contextual backdrop for the paper by outlining several factors that contribute to the challenges of fostering collective subjectivity. We also share insights from our four-year large-scale research project on commoning (INDIGO)[2], which underscored the critical need to understand the role of subjectivity in commoning practices, but failed to materialise it.

The interplay between individual and collective subjectivity presents a persistent challenge in socially innovative and commoning initiatives, where entrenched

individualist norms and mindsets frequently shape activists' behaviour. Collective subjectivity in this paper is subjectivity as developed through a commoning subjectivation process based on social innovation values. Unlike social subjectivity of groups of people, which typically reflects the contradictory dynamics of mainstream vs. change ideology, economic practices, and resistance to or pursuit of social change, collective subjectivity emerges through shared principles and practices of commoning. Social change agents, often influenced by neoliberal ideologies and individualist subjectivities, frequently prioritize 'practical' approaches over approaches addressing the complexity of social relations and ethics in commoning; this can unintentionally undermine collective efforts, reinforcing the very systems these initiatives seek to dismantle, and impede the development of collective subjectivity. Several factors contribute to this. Firstly, deeply ingrained individualist and market-driven perspectives often shape people's engagement in socially innovative initiatives, where efforts to collectivize may merely reflect personal needs unmet by the market or welfare systems, rather than a true shift away from individualism. Secondly, social change agents, while advocating solidarity and mutual aid, operate within a society influenced by neoliberal values and bureaucratic frameworks, which we can consider as factors of social subjectivation. Mental frameworks and social subjectivation are highly permeated by economic efficiency and hierarchical views of society and its organizations. In bureaucracies, even in non-hierarchical ones, agency is codified to ensure standardized interventions by agents, often through ICT systems. Performance-based evaluations, fragmented roles, depersonalized work relations, and the emphasis on efficiency over care can all reinforce individualistic behaviour, discouraging collaboration and shared responsibility. In dominant social subjectivation processes, such as in many bureaucracies, shared leadership and emotional aspects of community building are marginalized. Thirdly, the 'pragmatic' or 'practical' approach of many social innovation actors, influenced by neoliberal funding criteria and the urgent need to address pressing social issues (like food insecurity and homelessness) fosters a pragmatic social subjectivity, often justified by the slogan 'There is no time to be soft'. This practical turn in social activism emphasizes tangible results in addressing social issues. It manifests in various ways, including adapting to principles of neoliberalism's New Public Management (NPM) imposed by funding agencies and regulators on organizational and resourcing schemes of socially innovative organizations and social movements. The practical turn also leads to a focus on social organization rather than political mobilization, based on a belief that politics hinder socially innovative commoning practices; at times this means sacrificing social sustainability for ecological goals (Parra 2013; Parra and Moulaert 2011). In this context, priority is given to what is considered 'urgency' over micro-democracy and conviviality. This urgency is often driven by a sense of insecurity regarding the satisfaction of human needs – a feeling that manifests as psychic fear and can often be expressed through arrogant speech and behaviour (Haroche 2015: 249). Finally, socially innovative and commoning actors' interest in transforming the socio-political system is waning due to diminished trust in politics and in the state, linked to: the pressure of the 'market society' (Polanyi ([1944] 2001); the ubiquity of the control state because of the growing dominance of NPM managerial practices and the facilitation of control mechanisms by ICT developments; the deplorable individualist ethics of many politicians (Moulaert et al. 2022). As social innovation literature has pointed out, such 'practical' approaches lead to the undervaluation of alternative discourse, emotions, multi-vocality, solidarity-based social relations cum cooperation and transformative social and political action within social innovation initiatives (Moulaert et al. 2024b, 293 a.f.).

In a context of ever-evolving individualist, state control and economic imperatives, the need for re-building social relations of solidarity and cooperation appears evident. But recognizing the centrality of this is simply 'not enough' – researchers and activists need to better engage, understand, and reflect on the role of subjectivity in commoning practices. This conclusion emerged from the analysis of an ambitious Action Research project INDIGO aiming to better understand the intricate human dynamics of building and sustaining a *landed commons*. In particular, the research analysed processes of interaction and decision-making among actors involved in commoning of scarce land resources in Flanders, Belgium, focusing on the creation of slow paths created to form supra-local connections for soft use (walking, biking, …), of a common agricultural space for organic food production, and of alternative housing models for deprived groups. Researchers made innovative use of narrative framing inspired by a theory in the scientific tradition of pragmatism (entitled Théorie des Cités Plus, Bruno et al. 2024) to understand the justifications, co-evolution of justifications, and negotiation between communities of practice and other actors in developing these landed commons. This led to a methodological framework for the analysis, evaluation, and (co)design of interaction processes in commoning allowed for reconstructing the time and space dynamics of the interaction between actors building the commons, the actor geography, the factors driving person-actors (visions, triggering events, changes in socio-political settings and administrative

frameworks, and so on) and actions as well as interactions at sequential points in time. The approach emphasized the dynamics of interaction between actors, acknowledging the crucial role of micro-social relations in these processes (while not overlooking the institutional elements), and considered personal and interpersonal psychological factors (Moulaert et al. 2024a). Despite these foci, the issue of actors' subjectivity and subjectivisation repeatedly emerged but remained under-researched. For example, in the INDIGO case study focusing on slow paths created to form supra-local connections between localities, action researchers highlighted their difficulty in unpacking the resistance of a sheep farmer whose anxiety and despair over the slow path's proximity and risk of seeing the expansion of his land constrained, inhibited years-long negotiation processes for building this landed commons (Bruno et al. 2024). Given the results of this research, which revealed insufficient methodological consideration of the role of social relations in forming collective subjectivity and the relative autonomy of individual subjectivities in forming it, this paper aims to critically engage with the role of subjectivity in commoning practices.

3. HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY AS CULTURALLY, SOCIALLY, HISTORICALLY LOCATED

The starting point for our analysis of subjectivity and subjectivation in social innovation and commoning practices is borrowed from González Rey who, in reaction to overly rational and reductionist approaches to subjectivity that often neglect the emotional and symbolic dimensions of human experience,[3] defines subjectivity as 'units of emotions and symbolic processes generated throughout human experience' (González Rey 2017: 1). We delve into the prominent features of this definition of subjectivity that are relevant for our discussion on individual and collective subjectivities in social innovation and commoning practices.[4] Although González Rey's definition is not without blind spots – most notably in terms of its wider engagement with senses, nature, and discourse – we suggest that his understanding of subjectivation processes can serve as a sounding board for our discussion on the potential of (re)subjectivation in socially innovative and commoning practices.

3.1 INTERWEAVING OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL SUBJECTIVITIES

Drawing on Soviet and Western cultural-historical psychology literature that was not always explicitly oriented towards subjectivity, González Rey offers a contemporary relevant reading of subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint and advances an ontological definition of what subjectivity is. Subjectivity is a 'culturally, socially and historically located production' made up of 'units of symbolical processes and emotions'; together, these units form unique subjective configurations, shaping both social and individual subjectivities through their intricate interplay (González Rey 2017: 2). Seeing subjectivity as a cultural-historical formation contrasts with the notion of subjectivity as anchored in a universal 'human condition'. This latter view is sometimes intimated and debated by post-Freudian authors who identify subjectivity in Freud's definitions of representation, considering subjectivity as an imaginary production that can embody the force of drives that are shaped by unconscious processes (Castoriadis 1995; Elliott 1992, as discussed in González Rey 2017: 2).

Subjectivation should not be restricted to individual processes; it also incorporates processes and arrangements that are generated within the cultural-social life, which do not necessarily always *reproduce* cultural-social life. Human subjects may be socially constructed, 'but from a constructive position they exert choices which are never quite reducible to the forces that constructed them in the first place' (Frosh, 2002: 3). This ontological principle breaks down the primacy of social determinism, showing the way for the role of human desires and imaginations and the potential to re-imagine symbolic frameworks in their subjectivation. A cultural-historical understanding of subjectivity highlights the role of societal conditions and is particularly relevant for understanding the manner in which individual (referring to personal) and social (referring to groups of people and socialization dynamics) subjectivities interact. In particular, this reading of subjectivities integrates a 'qualitative side of human phenomena, both social and individual, understanding each of these configured within the other through specific subjective senses resulting from the subjective configuration of the other. Despite one being configured within the other, social and individual subjectivities represent two different sites of subjective productions, maintaining tensional and contradictory relationships between them' (González Rey 2017: 3).

3.2 THE GENERATIVE CAPACITY OF SUBJECTIVITIES AND RE-SUBJECTIVATION

González Rey emphasizes that subjectivity should not be understood in opposition to objectivity, but rather that it refers to the 'objective character of human phenomena' that takes place within culture (González Rey 2017: 3). In particular, its functioning involves 'individual and social instances as agents who have active, generative and creative character' (ibid). Any social experience becomes subjective through the occurrence of subjective senses,

which are the 'subjective side of any living experience' (González Rey 2017: 13). They do not merely reflect the objective processes of experience. Instead, subjective senses are individual and social creations shaped by how social symbolic constructions are perceived by individuals, groups, and institutions, each influenced by their distinct subjective histories. Subjectivity is thus 'not a result but an authentic human production that differentiates itself from all the processes engaged in its genesis' (González Rey 2017: 14). These subjective senses include all the social symbolic constructions on which our cultural-social environment is constructed, involving attributes like race, gender, age, social status, pathological labels (ibid). His emphasis on the qualitative nature of psychological units and the integration of theory and methodology underscored the generative aspect of subjectivity: individuals and groups are able to create new cultural environments beyond immediate influences. Imagination, described by González Rey as a key non-rational attribute of the psyche, plays a crucial role in this process. According to Castoriadis (1995:15 as quoted in González Rey 2017), imagination, rather than logic, is fundamental to reflective thought and social creativity. González Rey understands imagination as a subjective process that integrates and transforms images into concepts, generating new models and symbolic processes closely intertwined with emotions. This creative capacity of imagination is essential for forming new cultural realities and continuously evolving forms of subjectivation. The generative character of subjective phenomena, involving emotions and reflecting socio-cultural and historical experiences, may lead to configuring new kinds of subjective phenomena – this brings us to the next feature of subjectivity, involving its capacity to challenge and exert pressure.

3.3 THE SUBVERSIVE NATURE OF SUBJECTIVE PRODUCTION

González Rey argues that understanding subjectivity as units of emotions and symbolic processes generated throughout human experience opens up the possibility for subjective productions to subvert institutional orders, representing new social pathways. The exact manner in which this potential unfolds is linked to the process whereby subjective sense emerges. *Firstly*, the fact that subjectivity is nestled within cultural-social life but doesn't necessarily reproduce it allows for understanding it as 'emancipated from psyche as a natural system' and, at the same time, as 'a resource for emancipation from the socially dominant institutional order' (González Rey 2017: 13). This is key for understanding the subversive element that this definition offers. *Secondly*, we highlight what González Rey refers to as 'the relative stability' of subjective configurations, which according to him results from the resistance these offer to change in the face of the new processes that result from the actual moment of any ongoing activity. He argues:

> this stability is relative because paths and decisions taken by individuals and groups, as the agents of their own actions, lead to new subjective senses. Any new paths taken by the agents of actions will imply the emergence of new subjective senses, which would integrate, or not, into the subjective configuration in the process of one experience (González Rey 2017: 14).

This suggests that individuals and groups, as agents of their own actions, have the capacity to make decisions and take paths that help form new subjective senses. This perspective implies a degree of empowerment and self-determination, as individuals actively contribute to the ongoing process of subjective development and formation through their actions and decisions. By the same token, this also suggests how difficult it is to shift away from mainstream systems and norms. Furthermore, the subversive nature of subjectivities is linked to the interplay and recursiveness between individual and social subjectivities: 'Individual and social actions are simultaneously configured in individuals and in social scenarios within which individual actions take place, and are in tension with one another' (González Rey 2017: 16). This tension is expressed through individuals and social agents that 'actively and reflexively create their own paths, taking their own decisions during their experiences' (ibid).

3.4 COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVATION: IS ANOTHER WORLD REALLY POSSIBLE?

This exploration of the different dimensions of subjectivity and subjectivation offers a reliable, yet provisional soundboard for addressing the interpretation and analysis of subjectivity and subjectivation of actors in social innovation and commoning experiences. In advancing beyond González Rey's framework, we expand his concept of 'sense,' anchor collective subjectivity in commitment to ethical values such as mutual aid and egalitarianism, and place a stronger emphasis on the dialectical role of discourse in shaping collective subjectivation.

First off, we note that González Rey's use of the concept of 'sense' involves subjective significance (sense making) as well as the interaction among the five senses, essential for sense making and subjectivation. Both meanings are related, but it is our impression that for González Rey the term 'subjective sense' especially receives a psychologically construed existential meaning. Following Serres ([1985] 2008), we are convinced that subjective

sense is a creative outcome of the interaction between the inner and outer I, involving all five senses. The conjoining of the five senses celebrates the body as the space of invention and abundance, captured in the sixth or common sense of bodily joy: 'here, Serres evokes astonishingly the seraphic pleasures of self-exceeding, to be found, for example, in the pleasures of swimming, of running, in the human fascination with the trampoline, or in the playing of rugby. Here, the body becomes itself in playing with, or transforming itself' (Connor, 1999: para 33). Seen as such, the senses can be understood as the essence of the body forming and reforming itself, fundamental to any type of transformation or invention, and highly relevant in ecosocial therapeutic, socially innovative and commoning practices.

Bringing Serres on board opens new registers broadening the interpretation of subjectivity (Serres 1995). An important lesson to be drawn from Serres' work is that the 'language of words' has a limited capacity to grasp human existence in its full dimensions; and therefore, unless it opens up to the panoply of senses, its use as a formator of subjectivity works reductively (Kaethler 2017). In this way, Serres' deconstruction of language of words can be considered as a more inclusive approach to the use of language than understood by Lacan who is considered a reference for the role of symbolic order in the working of the human mind. Although Lacan recognizes that language has both a symbolic and an imaginary dimension (1971), he works with a 'language of words', discourses built on words, instead of multivocal (or silent) expressions facilitated by Serres' five senses.

Referring to González Rey's emphasis on the relative stability of subjective configurations (see section 3.3), we zoom in on the actual moment of resistance, which exists at a crossroads of the real and mental condition of the (human) subject and the socio-cultural as well natural conditions in which the subject exists, potentially mobilizing their full range of senses. The socio-cultural conditions, a heavy weight factor of social subjectivity, refer to the capacitating but also alienating impact of the social relations in which the individuals and groups perform. On one end of their dialectics, these social relations are shaped by dominant systems such as capitalist markets and embodying the TINA [There Is No Alternative (beyond the market)] ideology (promoting individual subjectivity based on self-interest and personal benefit), state control (enforcing bureaucratic norms), STEM education (based on hard science and its view of the world) and health ideologies (favouring treatment over prevention). These hegemonic frameworks of social subjectivation create rigid mental and symbolic orders that limit resistance, subjective disruption and creativity. They are a main factor of the rigidification of minds and the adoption of a 'practical' ethics by many activists (see Section 2). Conversely, social relations based on mutual aid, harmony with nature, and radical imagination – seen in social innovation, solidarity-based, commoning practices and ecosocial emancipation – represent counter-hegemonic projects in which many commoners feel nested. These efforts, often termed under the umbrella Another World Is Possible (AWIP), emphasize collective subjectivity (Novy and Lengauer 2008; Wildemeersch 2018, Ch. 2). The literature addressing AWIP uncovers factors of collective subjectivation that are only implicitly mentioned in González Rey's framework– the latter being more concerned with describing and analysing the processes by which subjective experiences are formed, rather than exploring deeper ethical questions, immersing in a multi-sensual world and their relationships with the different characters of social subjectivity. Factors of collective subjectivation processes in line with a counter-hegemonic project refer to the role of (immersion in) socio-ecological processes, the role of micro-socialization processes as in socially innovative communities in making ecosocial transformation happen (Elsen 2018), the role of practice and ethics in building collective subjectivity (Moulaert et al. 2024b), the diversity of sensory experiences beyond the confines of language and rational analysis (Serres [1985] 2008), and the multifarious facets of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse (Bramall, 2011).

Holding this alternative literature onto the mirror offered by González Rey shows that in contrast to González Rey's understanding of social subjectivity, which we use to position collective subjectivity, part of this literature has reduced collective subjectivity to political subjectivity – overlooking the plurality as well as the complexity of social subjectivation processes. In doing so, it overlooks the path dependency of individual and social subjectivity – another world and collective subjectivity inevitably grow from the conditions and agencies in the existent world. Without wanting to canonize discourse as the major factor of subjectivation, we recognize its impact both as booster of dominant ideas and practices, but also as a mode of responding and protesting – from TINA to AWIP – building alternative discourses feeding collective subjectivity through social subjectivation, by regenerating institutional and symbolic frameworks, designing new symbols and ethical anchors, not least through socio-ecological experiences and practicing solidarity with humans and nature (see Section 4).

González Rey's theory focuses on meaning-making and subjectivation, distinguishing between individual and social subjectivity, but it underappreciates how discourse actively contributes to these processes. He critiques

Western intellectual trends by noting modernism's focus on rationality at the expense of emotions and postmodernism's reduction of human phenomena to discursive practices and symbolic frameworks, neglecting other theoretical models. In a later work, he distinguishes between discourse, which he views as part of social orders, and subjective senses and configurations, which he sees as unique and independent from external constraints (González Rey 2018). While recognizing discourse's role in shaping subjectivity, González Rey's definition of discourse seems limited compared to discourse's dialectical role in constructing hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives. His interpretation suggests that discourse primarily originates externally, while in psychological practice, such as Lacanian analysis, discourse reflects both the internalization of dominant discourses and personal expressions of individual fears, anxieties, desires, and hopes in micro existential contexts. His later work suggests that discourse interacts with subjectivity to advance new psychological theories but does not fully account for the personal, situated nature of individual discourse, which includes personal expressions of fear, hope, and frustration beyond dominant frameworks (Branney 2008).

Having thus explored the meaning of subjectivity, in the next section we move towards understanding the broader social and political implications of this understanding of subjectivity, in order to explore the relationship between the building of a socially innovative commons, the (re) production of social relations, and human subjectivities.

4. SUBJECTIVATION PROCESSES, SOCIAL RELATIONS AND COMMONING AGENCY

To address the often-overlooked relationships between subjectivity and social relations, and how these affect socially innovative and commoning agency, which we also identified as a shortcoming in our INDIGO project (see section 2), we draw insights from political ecology, eco-feminism, and anarchist literatures on individual, social, and collective subjectivities and their implications for socially innovative and commoning practices (Moulaert et al. 2024a). These literatures are among the scarce ones focussing on the interaction between subjectivities and agency in commoning and socially innovative activities, situating subjectivities and agency within the complex socio-ecological and socio-political relationships in which they take shape.

4.1 POLITICAL ECOLOGY: THE DRIVING FORCES OF POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

Subjectivity in Political Ecology (PE) underscores the importance of considering the diverse and complex ways in which people relate to each other and to their environment, integrating perspectives from different disciplines and acknowledging the role of power and identity, but also – and importantly – of emotions. Subjective, emotional, and performative experiences are understood as driving forces for the politics of resistance (Dallman et al. 2013; Nightingale 2011, 2013; Sultana 2015). In studying how unequal power structures and knowledge production reproduce human–environment relations, interdisciplinary PE writings also address the necessary conditions for addressing these unequal power structures, whereby collective action can occur. Through a González Rey lens, we could describe this as the conditions of social subjectivity that reinforce, unveil or revolt unequal power structures. Echoing the generative nature of subjective (symbolic) re-configurations, PE links the emergence of new collective ways of relating to 'subjectivities and inter-personal relationships that interplay to create the complex social contexts within which governance mechanisms develop and can be changed' (Partelow and Manlosa 2022: 266). And emphasizing the importance of subjectivities as a relational practice involving nonhumans, Basurto and Lozano (2021: 364) describe the social relations [of commoning] as being about 'the constant coming together of humans [...] a constantly changing and evolving relationality between humans, non-humans, their territories and histories, and the forging of subjectivities that ultimately give meaning to issues'.

In this literature, (re)subjectivation in the sense of [collective re-subjectivation] developing solidaristic and cooperative behaviour and human relations is about overcoming individualist ethics, neoliberal modes of behaviour (pursuit of individual economic benefits, consumerism, high-speed socialization, ...), and replacing them with attitudes of reciprocity, togetherness, belonging, and modes of behaviour of collective solidarity. These can be beneficial to building collective regenerative power to make community development and commons happen, but have a much more pervasive potential to (re)build commonality, compassion, and mutual aid.

Understanding 'how power relations, structural conditions and past experiences influence people's perception of (and relation to) themselves and others' (Velicu and García-López, 2018: 59) is fundamental for analysing how subjectivities are formed, but especially in terms of their connection to 'far-reaching political implications in terms of resisting neoliberal forms of life and experience and the convivial, communal way of life' (Velicu and García-López, 2018: 60, referring to Dawney 2013: 33). This (re)building of the convivial, communal way of life, we suggest, is central to forming collective subjectivities and is sometimes underplayed in the literature. Drawing on the

features of subjectivation described in previous sections, we see collective subjectivation emerging from a web of individual and AWIP-inspired social subjectivities.

Political Ecology's increasing focus on consciousness, subjectivities, and emotions to better understand environmental conflicts reflects broader poststructuralist debates on subjectivity, agency, and power. This shift, often referred to as an 'emotional turn' in political ecology, delves into the detailed analysis of the interior life of politics, examining the specific motivations behind political activism. This perspective, as discussed by Pulido (2003: 47), incorporates emotional, psychological, and spiritual development to illustrate how emotions can both trigger and limit the initiation and sustainment of mobilization. In line with this, González-Hidalgo (2017) explores how the interplay between fostering political fellowship and the formation of subjectivities emphasizes the connections between subjectivities and emotions. She investigates the underexplored link between PE and psychotherapy, questioning whether psychotherapeutic practices can inform current PE debates on the role of emotions in shaping subjectivities and actions. Drawing from a case study of a therapeutic experience for Indigenous and peasant activists in southern Chiapas, González-Hidalgo highlights the importance of subjectivation and community-building processes in commoning, noting that these are crucial not only for politicization but also valuable in their own right.

This neo-PE approach to (collective) subjectivation can be rephrased using the concepts of González Rey along with our theoretical reflections. Human beings have the capacity to act in ways that transcend the forces (structures, institutions, discourses, and mental frames) that originally shaped them. Desires, choices, emotions, and actions emerge from a continuous interaction between imagination and the influence of social environments, relations and conditions, as we noted regarding the subversive nature of subjective production (see section 2.3). The influence of diverse social environments and conditions should not be underestimated – they are the locus of individualist subjectivities that have the potential of stoking fear and individualist desire, but they are also the very stage that can inspire our desire to share and create a collective imagination where alternative social relations are entirely thinkable, i.e. our desire to adopt a collective subjectivity. These need to be seen in light of a broader notion of relational politics, such as that defined by Velicu and García-López. These relational politics should not be understood in a limitative sense of politics, but as part of the dynamics of the political that can be discerned at moments when 'the people act in ways that disrupt the existing government configuration and, in the process, constitute new forms of living and acting together' (Moulaert et al. 2022: 61). For this reason, we are reluctant towards an easy use of the term political subjectivity, preferring collective subjectivity, which through its subjectivation process in particular societal and institutional contexts can take on different forms of political subjectivity.

4.2 (ECO)FEMINISM: THE ROLE OF AFFECTS

Despite the diversity within ecofeminism, theorists commonly share the presupposition that social change is essential for ecological survival and that this must be paired with a shift in the prevailing modes of thought (Parra 2013). Ecofeminists also believe that nature demonstrates nondualistic and non-hierarchical relationships, which serve as models for transforming societal values, emphasizing the importance of human and cultural diversity in the process of social transformation (Howell 1997). Here we especially rely on Singh (2017) and Nightingale (2011, 2013, 2019) who focus on the interaction between commoning and subjectivation. They explore how social relations of difference are constantly produced out of everyday interactions in a grounded manner: they recognize the naturality of subjectivation as an interaction between the diverse social and cultural frames, the (re)production of emotions, and the role of 'doing' (building commons) in building (collective subjectivity). We also relate to their understanding of political subjectivity, which they connect not only to the shared conscientization process, but also to the internal psychic processes and the living experience of doing things (in common). Ecofeminist theory draws from poststructuralist and affect theory traditions, differing to the notion of subjectivity rooted in cultural-historical psychology as espoused by González Rey – but despite this difference they also stress the factorial role of lived experience in subjectivation and we find complementarity in understanding the fluid and dynamic nature of emotions and their role in shaping social interactions, relations and identities.

Singh (2017) draws attention to subjectivity in the study of the commons, focusing on affective and communicative relations among humans and between humans and more-than-humans. She argues that the commons can be conceptualized as a site of affective socio-nature encounters or as affective socioecological relations that can foster subjectivities of 'being in common' with others (Singh 2017: 754). These practices of commoning may enable the emergence of 'other-than-capitalist subjectivities' (Singh 2017). Singh employs the concept of 'affect' to describe the pre-conscious, embodied experiences and intensities that shape individuals' capacities to act and relate. Affect in this context is understood as a form of social and emotional energy that circulates among individuals and within communities, influencing behaviours and interactions

in ways that are often non-verbal and non-rational. Her analysis centres on the embodied, non-conscious dimensions of experience that influence collective behaviours and social subjectivities, highlighting the ways in which emotions and intensities shape these.

Nightingale (2019) defines commoning as practices that foster new, affective relations and subjectivities, characterized by their transitory and unpredictable nature. She emphasizes that these socio-natural relations involve complex inclusions and exclusions shaped by power dynamics, requiring ongoing awareness and adaptation to maintain collective subjectivities, which are inherently partial and evolving. The emphasis on subjectivities within the building of new social relations in practices of commoning is not limited to the body and psyche, but to its spatial dimension of engagement with specific contexts (Nightingale 2013). Emphasizing the fluid nature of subjectivities, the functioning of commons are the product of personal interactions, histories and relationships that need to be continually renewed (Nightingale 2015). This forms the basis of alternative rationalities, which need to become conscious of the inextricable link to social relations of power and the ways in which people understand their relationship to others (be it human or nonhuman). We point to how 'becoming conscious' is a fundamental element of the generative nature of collective subjectivities and of their potential for forging new institutional pathways – with an eye to this not over-running or overruling the body, the senses, as a flight beyond 'grammared' language and rationality in the creative (re)generation.

4.3 ANARCHISM: RECONFIGURING SOCIAL RELATIONS

Similar to political ecologists, recent anarchist scholarship emphasizes the significance of (collective) subjectivation and the community-building process for politicization and for reconfiguring social structures. Collective anarchist thought and practice offer opportunities for reimagining the political landscape with new topologies that support noncoercive, nonauthoritarian, and decentralist alternatives (Barnett, 2016; Clark, 1978). Anarchism usually focuses on political subjectivity, yet attributing it a diverse meaning from (for example) political economists, and especially speaking to local communities. As such, while sharing some similarities with poststructuralist ideas of fluid and dynamic subjectivities, anarchist subjectivity places a stronger emphasis on ethical agency and the intentional creation of non-hierarchical socio-political relations. An anarchist lens on subjectivity prioritizes community in fostering individual and collective transformation, exploring the interplay between individual freedom and social cooperation (Bookchin [1989] 2017). From early-on, anarchist authors recognized the building of social relations for their own right: whilst asserting individual autonomy and the capacity for self-determination (whereby individuals are seen as being capable of making independent choices and resisting external control shape their social realities), anarchist thought and practice deeply explores the interconnectedness of individuals within communities and the role of mutual aid, solidarity, and cooperative practices in shaping individual and collective identities. These offer alternative forms of subversion, resistance and reconstruction that stimulate thinking and reimagining of the political, which we argue are fundamental to social innovation and commoning initiatives.

In today's anarchist turn, the building of community through social relations and collective subjectivities is prominent as a way of addressing prime anarchist concerns – overcoming human alienation from labour exploitation, individualist education and living styles, reduction of freedom to freedom to consume and sell one's labour power, anonymization of personal contacts in the mega-city, etc. (Bookchin 1973). Social ecology is an important domain of anarchist resistance today, strongly inspired by Murray Bookchin – considered as the spiritual father of social ecology, which he also calls eco-anarchism. Following Bookchin, social ecology covers the dialectical relationship between nature and society and thus plays an important part in understanding social subjectivation processes (Bookchin [1989] 2017). It sees human subjects as the products of both natural and social evolution. It claims that 'all current environmental problems are ultimately social problems, rooted in a new rational and anti-ecological society whose crises cannot be solved through piecemeal, single issue reform measures' (Best 1998: 337). The anarchist literature on subjectivation stresses the therapeutic role of community building and the building of relationships of interpersonal communication, trust, mutual support, friendship, and so on. It considers these relations as essential in creating a solid (socio-) political subjectivity.

Blumenfeld et al. (2013) argue that true freedom can only be achieved through equality, which requires micro-social relations that foster self-emancipation. They explore how contemporary anarchist practices, such as commensality and friendship, contribute to collective subjectivation and social transformation. In this collective work Banu Bargu highlights that commensality, or shared meals, fosters egalitarian subjectivities and critical political culture, while Todd May (2013) emphasizes that certain friendships can create new political possibilities by challenging neoliberal social frameworks and promoting solidarity (Bargu 2013; Blumenfeld et al. 2013). Anarchist thought on collective subjectivation offers an insightful view of the generative potential for individuals and communities to transcend

the constraints imposed by hierarchical and coercive systems through creation of alternative, egalitarian social relations. Such notions, though going beyond the ethical and normative commitments espoused in González Rey 's definition, resonate with his approach highlighting the potentialities for new institutional pathways to arise from the complex interplay between individual and collective configurations of subjectivities.

4.4 FOSTERING GENUINE COLLECTIVE RE-SUBJECTIVATION IN SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE COMMONING PRACTICES

The analytical framework we drew from and built upon to understand subjectivity and subjectivation processes addresses the complex interaction between the multifarious forms of individual and social subjectivation within broader cultural-historical processes, the interaction between emotions and discourses, the role of 'grammared' and 'ungrammared' language built on multi-sensual perception and expression, and human-nature interaction. While the specific foci in political ecology, ecofeminism, and anarchist scholarship – as well as the movements they inform – are well established, in our exploration of the three literatures addressing subjectivation processes we highlight their complementarities. Analysed against a González Rey framework, these literatures highlight that fostering agency to build spaces for new social trajectories and innovative institutional pathways involves acknowledging alternative discourse, emotions, affective relationships, multi-vocality, collective reflection and transformative socio-political action in the building of collective subjectivities within communities practicing socially innovative commoning. Political ecologists, ecofeminist and anarchist authors underline that resubjectivation needs a material basis – formed by the interaction between individual humans and their aspirations, their community and its material forms, both human and nonhuman. The interaction with nature is essential, as especially ecofeminism and social ecology as defended by anarchism document. Furthermore, the role of affects – the pre-conscious, embodied experiences and intensities – that shape individuals' capacities to act in collective subjectivities as emphasized in ecofeminist literature must not be forgotten; linked to this is the potential of psychoanalysis and its theories in building processes of collective subjectivation. As Roelvink et al. (2015) suggest, work on the conscious and unconscious can 'provoke new practises of the self' (ibid, p. 11); these in turn can stimulate new practices within collectives. Political ecology highlights the emotional and performative experiences of subjects as driving forces for the politics of resistance; ecofeminism the understanding of affective and communicative social relations among humans and between humans and more-than-humans in everyday experiences; and anarchism the interplay between individual freedom and social cooperation in reimagining the political subject and community building. All these point to the importance of multi-vocal collective experience in a socioecological environment for collective re-subjectivation (see Table 1 in Annex for an in-depth summary).

Using the example case study in the INDIGO research (see Section 2), the conflict surrounding the sheep farmer's resistance to the slow path highlights the critical importance of understanding subjectivities within the broader commoning process. The farmer's actions, deeply rooted in insecurities about his livelihood and the cultural and economic pressures specific to his context, illustrate how personal fears and positionality can obstruct collective goals. In this case, the farmer's subjectivity was shaped by concerns over land viability for his farm, the economic impact of changing regulations on sheep slaughter, and anxieties about privacy and public access near his home. These features of his individual subjectivity were insufficiently addressed in the Action Research's procedures. Deeper involvement of the sheep farmer in co-construction activities of the slow path and its amenities and providing spaces for emotional and co-construction feedback might have fostered a sense of inclusion and shared purpose, diminishing his resistance and strengthening the overall process rather than leaving him feeling marginalized. The absence of recognition of subjectivity in the procedures downplayed the capacity of the other actors and certainly the Action Researchers to empathise with the fears and hopes of all actors. To overcome such obstacles, collective re-subjectivation could have offered a more constructive approach. This would involve facilitating bilateral and multilateral dialogues, peer and non-peer exchanges (commensality, friendly encounters, creation of a shared interest group, ...) and therapeutic activities aimed at understanding individual fears and hopes between stakeholders, and building trust among them. By embracing solidarity-based communication, sharing mutual interests in practice, and engaging in collective reflection and role negotiation, the commoning process could better align individual and collective needs. For the Action Researchers involved in the case study, this would have also meant acquiring deeper insights into their own and the others' mental frames.

5. LOOKING AHEAD: SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE COMMONING AND SUBJECTIVATION

Collective (re)subjectivation, as we have seen through the application of a González Rey lens on social and individual

subjectivation, involves a deep re-imagining of social relations and socially innovative agency that challenge dominant individualist mindsets and interrelated challenges for social change agents; it also involves recognizing the reality of institutional stability – not to say rigidity. In this context, collective action research strategies based on the ethics of social innovation can be instrumental in nurturing glimmers for alternative ways of feeling and acting. Deciding and visioning together, providing space for different personalities, developing a common language, negotiating shared ethics, collective reflection moments, and combining practice with analysis, together form a communicative pathway for potential re-subjectivation (personal and social), which is essential for collective subjectivation (Moulaert et al. 2024c).

Examining the role of subjectivity and subjectivation in Action Research still has a ways to go in understanding the bridge between individual and collective subjectivation. Nevertheless, some insights can be drawn: engaging with socially innovative commoning endeavours involves collective re-subjectivation processes that should be linked to fostering mutual aid, building cooperative and respectful relationships among involved subjects, engaging with nature, and escaping market fundamentalism. Personal re-subjectivation in such environments involves diverse processes: sharing with friends, therapeutic activities on a bilateral and multilateral basis (through therapy sessions, peer exchanges, experience witness feedback, etc.), involvement and role acceptance in a collective settings, adoption of alternative value systems by putting them into practice, collective growth, and co-construction experiences. Collective re-subjectivation is about adopting respectful communication, solidarity value systems, collective reflection and feedback processes, role sharing, and negotiating efficiency versus solidarity criteria. The 'starting point' for any individual is relevant in determining their position in a re-subjectivation process – whence the importance of the cultural and personal trajectories of the subjects involved. Ultimately, these re-subjectivation processes have the potential to inspire new forms of collective action, driving genuine social innovation instead of merely reinforcing existing norms and systems.

ANNEX 1

KEY COMPONENTS OF SUBJECTIVITY (G. REY 2017–REVISITED)	LITERATURE-INSPIRED INSIGHTS FOR FOSTERING COLLECTIVE SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE COMMONING PRACTICES		
	POLITICAL ECOLOGY	ECOFEMINISM	ANARCHISM
Interweaving of individual and social subjectivities fostering collective subjectivity	The formation of political subjectivity through commoning practice	Affective socio-nature encounters allow alternative rationalities (becoming conscious of social relations of power and relationships to others – be they human or nonhuman)	The interplay between individual freedom and social cooperation is essential to building solid communities
Social structures and socio-political relations affecting individual and social subjectivities	Diverse social environments and conditions are the locus of individualist subjectivities that have the potential of stoking fear and individualist desire, but can inspire our desire to share and create a collective imagination	Socio-natural relations involve complex inclusions and exclusions shaped by power dynamics, requiring ongoing awareness and adaptation to maintain collective subjectivities	Ethical agency and the intentional creation of non-hierarchical non-coercive and decentralist socio-political relations
Relations between subjectivity and emotions	Emotional and performative experiences of subjects as driving forces for the politics of resistance	The fluid and dynamic nature of emotions and their role in shaping social interactions, relations and identities	The formation of egalitarian subjectivities through commensality and friendship
Symbolic orders and subjectivation	Become aware of all forces and mental frames that can reinforce, unveil or revolt unequal power structures	'Becoming conscious' is a fundamental element of the generative nature of collective subjectivities and of their potential for forging new institutional pathways	Overcoming rational symbolic orders and 'grammared' language through socio-political criticism, multi-vocality and creating alternative mental frames
The subversive nature of subjective production and the formation of the political subject	Subjective, emotional, and performative experiences as driving forces for the politics of resistance	Alternative rationalities allow for becoming conscious of social relations of power and relationship to others (be it human or nonhuman)	Through experiencing noncoercive, nonauthoritarian, and decentralist alternatives in local communities
Subjective experiences creating new social trajectories and innovative institutional pathways	Human beings have the capacity to act in ways that transcend the forces (structures, institutions, discourses, and mental frames) that originally shaped them	Interaction between the diverse social and cultural frames, the (re)production of emotions, and the role of 'doing' (building commons) in building (collective subjectivity)	Cooperative practices as grounds for alternative forms of subversion, resistance and reconstruction that stimulate thinking and reimagining of the political

(Contd.)

KEY COMPONENTS OF SUBJECTIVITY (G. REY 2017–REVISITED)	LITERATURE-INSPIRED INSIGHTS FOR FOSTERING COLLECTIVE SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE COMMONING PRACTICES		
	POLITICAL ECOLOGY	ECOFEMINISM	ANARCHISM
Collective Subjectivation affecting human/non-human relations	(Re)building of the convivial, communal way of life is central to forming collective subjectivities	The naturality of subjectivation as an interaction between the diverse social and cultural frames, the (re) production of emotions, and the role of 'doing' (building commons) in building (collective subjectivity)	The building of community through social relations and collective subjectivities is prominent as a way of addressing prime anarchist concerns – overcoming human alienation from labour exploitation, individualist education and living styles
The role of psychotherapeutic practices	The role of psychotherapeutic practices in building communities	Caring for affective and communicative relations among humans and between humans and more-than-humans	The therapeutic role of community building and the building of relationships of interpersonal communication, trust, mutual support, and friendship

Table 1 Literature-inspired Insights on Subjectivity via González Rey's Framework.

NOTES

1 As will be elaborated in this paper, subjectivity is defined here as the units of emotions and symbolic processes generated throughout human experience (González Rey (2017: 1).

2 The INDIGO project 'Innovating Spatial Development Planning by Differentiating Land Ownership and Governance' ran from 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2018, with some cases being updated in the 2020s; it focused on cases in Flanders (Belgium) and engaged with the processes of interaction and decision-making among actors involved in landed commoning in three cases covering the themes of slow paths, agriculture, and housing. For details see Moulaert et al. 2024b and www.theindigoproject.be.

3 González Rey's approach to subjectivity is heavily influenced by Soviet psychology and inspired by K. Lewin, Vygotsky, and Bozhovich's team, which emphasized the qualitative nature of psychological units and the integration of theory and methodology.

4 González Rey holds a nuanced attitude towards the dominance of symbolic orders in subjectivation, different from Lacan, for example, who as summarized by Branney (2008) explains that we are symbolic beings who draw upon language to understand our world and ourselves.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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