

Commoning the Commons

Birgit Daiber, May 2016

With the Workers Recuperated Companies (WRC) and self-organised post-labour-projects as common goods a new colour integrates into the spectrum of Commons. The reports of some of the initiatives in the meeting in Rome¹ show remarkable growth of WRCs': In Argentina about 16 000 people are working in WRC's, in Greece activists organise WRCs and public health-care and try to save living and working conditions under the threat of the EU-austerity-regime, in France, workers' cooperatives (SCOPs) show remarkable success. „They break with the individualisation and commodification of labour power by the capitalist mode of production. To manage labour as a commons entails a shift away from the perception of labour as an individual commodity, towards a new notion of labour as a collectively and sustainably managed resource, as the human capacity to create, which is put to use for the benefit of society as a whole” (Dario Azzellini).

Labour as commons is part of social commons. Social commons reclaim transformative social protection schemes “as democratic, participative and rights-based version of social protection” (Francine Mestrum). An already well experienced strategy is the “!Dignidad!”-initiative (Life of Dignity for all) in South-East Asia promoted by the Asean-European People's Forum (AEPF): “ The social movements deem labour, land, food, essential services and social security as part of the commons of humanity that are vital to sustaining life. They are intimately linked to the survival, dignity and development of individuals, society and nature. Therefore they should be safeguarded, valued as sacrosanct and financed by the state. ... The political will of states, backed by peoples' movements from below, can generate the massive pressure needed to mobilize all democratic forces and institutions in society to seek a transformative type of social protection over and above poverty reduction. Ultimately, the campaign for social protection is not an end in itself. It is an integral part of the struggle for a just, equitable and sustainable development paradigm that has the mechanisms for the democratic ownership and management of essential social services and goods, and mechanisms for a system of production and consumption structured for the satisfaction of the need of the people and community” (Tina Ebro).

¹ Transform! Europe, Seminar on „Production and Common”, *Rome, March 11-12, 2016*

Social Movements and Trade Unions cooperate since years in AEPF trying to give a response to the exponentially growth of informalisation of labour in South-East Asia. This is an excellent example for the cooperation between civil-society partners from different backgrounds. And such co-operations never were as existential as they are today: Basic workers' and social rights constantly are violated or have never been implemented. The actual grand transformation of capitalism in its unparalleled capability to destruct human basic conditions does not stop out of respect of the historic struggles of workers movements – in all parts of the world. Capitalism in its dominant logic is shifting away from “real economics” to a phantasmagoric system (but nevertheless real and repressive). It is trying to submit all kind of resources – goods and services, nature, human beings, communication and labour - to its regime. Michel Bauwens and P2P-Foundation say, besides the classical struggle between labour and capital today the traditionally not-so-apparent fundamental question “Who decides what is value?” and Commoners give an answer exercising a new system by creating value through dissemination of knowledge in a sustainable, open and solidary way.

Nevertheless the relation between labour and capital is still in the centre of societal conflicts. Even in European States with classical social systems labour is devaluated and the classical social security systems are endangered. What is happening around the world is the implementation of unsecure and even neo-slavery working conditions. The transformative social protection schemes developed by AEPF, Global Social Justice Network and others try to fight this development.

Compared to classical approaches in social policy - sectorial, covering formal labour-relations, while informal labour is object to social assistance (if there exist any of such systems) - transformative schemes ask for workers and social rights as civil rights (In this regard “Dignidad!” refers to Art. 23 on economic rights in the UN Human Rights Charter from 1948).

Besides the initiatives of AEPF and WRC's other initiatives of social commons developed: self-organised social centres and the re-appropriation of abandoned industrial plants for activities of different kind (art-exhibitions and alternative festivals) are some of the examples. Another one is the (since about 30 years) virulent strategy for an unconditional basic income (UBI). What has been practised first as pilot-project in Otjivero/Namibia with extraordinary positive results is now proposed by the Namibia Government as a national strategy to redistribute wealth and land. Finland actually started a two years experiment on UBI. And even in Switzerland a referendum will be held whether the majority of citizens are

in favour of UBI. No doubt, to introduce a general unconditional basic income would be an essential change of paradigm – and every society will have to discuss carefully how to tailor the precise structure of UBI.

Reclaiming social commons is an existential necessity - and including them into the commons' movements is a challenge for the commons community. Some commoners may argue this could overstretch the community. And indeed, there are remarkable differences between the already existing commons activities and traditional social policy. Let's go deeper into the subject for a moment:

Commons initiatives have two basic characteristics: They create a dimension “that offers an alternative to the state and the market, as well as to both the public and private sectors” (Elisabetta Cangelosi) and they are defined by practical action realised by groups of citizens concerned: Small farmers and movements of landless people fight for access to land and seed, fisher-communities defend their common access to the sea, www-communities promote digital commons, well known too are the initiatives on water in Latin America and Europe and the decision of the UN general assembly in 2010² to include the access to water as basic human right into the Human Rights' Charter. Community housing and mutual home ownership in Indonesia as well as community land trusts in Great Britain, urban gardening, recuperation of public spaces and abandoned industrial plants and the organisation of alternative cultural festivals in big cities, the introduction of community currencies or initiatives to defend pasture commons in India – the diversity of initiatives all over the world is overwhelming. All of them reclaim commons in specific local fields of action. Even umbrella-projects are arising as the third national Plan for good living from 2013 to 2017 in Ecuador³ shows and the FLOK-project (Free/Libre Open Knowledge-Society) developed by IAEN (The National Institute of Advanced Studies Ecuador) calls for an open commons based knowledge society - translating the concept of 'buen vivir – sumac kawsay' – good living - into 'buen conoces – sumac yachay' - good knowledge - and demand of a social-knowledge-charter.

² *UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292 from 2010, „...Recognizes the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights...“*

³ Republic of Ecuador, National Planning Council, Good Living, National Plan 2013-2017, A better world for everyone

Overlooking the structure of the already documented commons initiatives we can distinguish some elements:

First of all: Commons initiatives develop in north and south and west and east of the planet. They form an essential part of the debates at World Social Forums. Perhaps for the first time a global social movement was initiated by the South (and is not dominated by the North). As Sandeep Chachra mentions: “The resurgence of a number of peoples movements and social struggles in south through campaigns on forest, water and land rights, indigenous and dalit rights, agricultural workers rights, labour rights, rights of women etc, in the last decade provide one type of social basis for fundamental advance.”

Secondly there is the impressive practical character of initiatives: They defend traditionally used common access to resources, land and coastal areas, they re-conquer free areas for common initiatives in cities, they collect money and found cooperatives – just to mention some of them. Looking to their social structure we see: Very often they combine paid and voluntary labour and create a culture of solidarity.

Thirdly on a strategic level initiatives try to find common definitions for action in one field as there are the IT- and social knowledge-initiatives.

On a fourth level we see initiatives on regional or national legislation to secure the so-called “third sector” and even on the level of European Union initiatives try to initiate European legislation facilitating commons and public services initiatives.

And fifth we acknowledge the decision of the UN to implement the right of drinkable water in the Human Rights Charter – backed by historical initiatives like the Cochabamba-Initiative, the Referendum on Water in Italy from 2011, local initiatives like in Thessaloniki, Berlin and other places around the world.

The commons movements created more general umbrella-structures – as the initiatives for social knowledge show, and they lead to legal initiatives on regional, national and global level – as the water-initiatives show.

And already some theoretical approaches appeared: The “Common Good of Humanity” (François Houtart) offers a reflection on commons in a holistic way challenging the four fundamental dimensions of the collective life of humanity: our relationship with nature, the production of life’s necessities,

collective organisation (politics) and the interpretation, evaluation and expression of reality (culture).

All these initiatives, actions, strategic and theoretical approaches show the efforts commoners make to find common ground to develop strategies and theoretical motivations communicating and bringing together the incredible wealth of diversity of commons on a more coherent level.

But what is the difference to social commons? First of all, the conflict between labour and capital did not disappear. In contrary – collective social risk systems and workers' rights are in the centre of attacks: The crisis management in Europe by governments, IMF and other players since 2008 tries to reduce existing collective social risk systems and workers' rights continuously. What is executed in Greece without any shame is the model for all European states suffering under the debt-crisis. The anti-poverty systems in Latin America introduced by left governments are getting under threat as these governments come to an end (or are brought down as in the actual case of Brazil) not to forget the fights around the very slight steps for a healthcare-system introduced by Barrack Obama in USA. Even a superficial look on the social landscape of the world show the enormous efforts taken to get rid of collective and public social systems. Just to remember: These rights were not a present given by generous States. They always had to be eked out in existential struggles in factories and on market places. From their start in the early 18th century in clandestine associations labour movements organised class struggles and still today Trade Unions defend social and workers' rights and organise resistance against the breakdown of traditional social systems. But often Trade Unions still follow their sectorial strategies and defend the rights of workers in the traditionally organised big industries and scarcely try to include the interests of basic civic interest. These strategies worked rather well in the past when the sectorial struggles of Trade Unions in the end brought better conditions in other parts of organised labour and created the common understanding of social and workers' rights in our societies. But do these strategies still work under the twofold threat with it's attacks against existing social rights and the massive development of all kind of unsecure, precarious and even neo-slavery working conditions and the growth of social exclusion, poverty and even slavery in the world?

Since the beginning of the world crisis in 2008 there are examples of a new thinking – not only in South-East Asia where Trade Unions, social movements and initiatives defending civil rights work together in AEPF. In Europe Trade Unions in public services try to defend public services existential for the living conditions of all citizens. On national level in some

countries – as in Italy and France – Trade Unions, commons initiatives and social movements cooperate closely and organise manifestations against the break down of social rights. On the transnational level the European Trade Unions Federation (ETUC) since its foundation in 1973 challenges EU with the demands of social regulation and workers' rights – at least surmounting national, sectorial and political historical differences between Trade Unions in Europe. In 2013 ETUC organised together with NGO's, left, green and civil movements the "Altersummit"⁴ against austerity-policy and neo-liberal strategies of EU and started its cooperation with transnational European social movements.

O.K., there is still a long way to go - from all sides, commoners, trade-unionists and social movements. Commons initiatives are civic actions and the practical expression of resistance against the commodification of resources and privatisation of living conditions. They are not based upon the classical power of working-class-struggles: the power to interrupt the capitalistic flow by strikes. The demand for transformative social rights as part of civil rights goes beyond the classical strategies of working-class movements. Power in commons movements is constituted by public opinion as well as transversal and transnational action. In this regard, indeed, the question of values "who is defining what is value" - is a central question of power for all progressive social movements, including Trade Unions.

Commoning and Commons seem to be an appropriate method to confront the destructive capitalist system with alternative paths of development and the continuous increase of projects all over the world seems to be part of a widespread rhizome.

Commoners already express hope to challenge capitalism and to fight for changing the societal paradigm. Social commons play a crucial role in this regard: "To be valid, the commons project must be able to create a social alliance that has the potential to surpass capitalism. As such, it needs to be at the heart of society. For that reason, it is essential to take into consideration the employees' demands for new rights as they benefit business at both social and environmental level." (Chantal Delmas and Benoît Borrits). No doubt, with the conflict between labour and capital social commons bring in a new dimension of struggles to the commons community. But leaving them aside would mean not to be able to challenge the system.

⁴ see www.altersummit.eu

Recently published documents:

Tina Ebro, Agenda for a Life of Dignity for All in the ASEAN against rising Inequality and Climate Change, Network for Transformative Social Protection (NTSP), Philippines, 2016

Chantal Delmas, Robert Morea (Eds.) Socialisation and Commons in Europe – Constructing an Alternative Project, Transform-Network, 2016

Francine Mestrum, The Commons, Social Justice and Systemic Change, Global Social Justice Network, Brussels 2016

Sandeep Chachra, Socialising the Socialist Vision, Work in Progress Note, New Dehli, 2016

Commons Transition: Policy Proposals for a Open Knowledge Commons Society, P2P-Foundation, Amsterdam 2015

Silke Helfrich (Ed.), Commons, 2015