

Motivation for the debate on Commons at the World Social Forum in Tunis, 24-28 March 2015, by Birgit Daiber, with comments by Sandeep Chachra and Francine Mestrum (already included).

Since its beginning in 2001 the World Social Forum gives space for commoning around the general slogan “Our World is not for Sale –another world is possible. The World Social Forum as process with its non-hierarchical structure creating an open space for exchange itself is an example for the creation of a common good. The declaration “Reclaim the Commons” at the WSF in Belém 2010 called on the world community “As more citizens discover this reality, a new vision of society is arising - one that honours human rights, democratic participation, inclusion and cooperation. People are discovering that alternatives and commons-based approaches offer practical solutions for protecting water and rivers, agricultural soils, seeds, knowledge, sciences, forest, oceans, wind, money, communication and online collaborations, culture, music and other arts, open technologies, free software, public services of education, health or sanitization, biodiversity and the wisdom of traditional knowledge.”

Meanwhile many common-networks, blogs and research-groups developed. Michel Bauwens and the P2P-foundation are proposing a Peer-to-Peer-economy and a commons-based new civilisation. And their Transition Plan referring to the Social-Knowledge-plan of Ecuador wants to give an introduction to a new configuration between state, civil society and Market. In the compendium “Degrowth – A vocabulary for a new era” the idea of a new paradigm is explained and examples of good practice are reported. François Houtart is proposing “The Common Good of Humanity” as new post-capitalist paradigm, “different from ‘common goods’ because of its more general character, involving the very foundations of the collective life of humanity on this planet: our relationship with nature, the production of life’s necessities, collective organisation (politics) and the interpretation, evaluation and expression of reality (culture).” And Peter Linebaugh says we can’t define what are commons – they exist where commoners reclaim them: No commons without commoning.

The political positions differ widely: Toni Negri and Michael Hardt see the developing debate as a strategy against the capitalistic system, Jeremy Rifkin says, the commons economy will grow aside the more and more globally monopolised big capitalistic economies, Silke Helfrich doesn’t want to talk about politics because this could disturb the rich variety and diversity.

Besides the theoretical and political debates actions in all kind of fields are brought to the light of the international public: from India to Indonesia to Africa to Latin America to Europe and North-America.

Small farmers and movements of landless people fight for access to land and seed, fisher-communities defend their common access to the sea, forest dwellers and forest dependant communities assert their collective right over forests, 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 2010 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 in big cities all over the world, the introduction of community currencies or Initiatives to defend pasture commons in India –many initiatives all over the world reclaim the commons in specific local fields of action or more complex as the Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) legislation in India that recognises collective and commons of tribal communities in scheduled areas of the country, or the third national Plan for good living from 2013 to 2017 in Ecuador that calls for an open commons based knowledge society - translating the concept of 'buen vivir – sumac kawsay' into 'buen conoces – sumac yachay' good knowledge and claiming for a social-knowledge-charter.

In the last years under the threat of neo-liberal dismantling of traditional workers rights and social standards the debate on social commons developed as well. Global Social Justice initiated the idea of social protection as a social commons at the WSF 2013. Another example for these initiatives was developed recently at the conference of the Asia-Europe-Peoples-Forum 2014. Under the headline "Universal and Transformative Social Protection – guaranteed jobs and livelihoods, access to essential services and social security for all. In the final declaration of the conference social protection " is a fundamental right that does not only protect, but also prevent individuals against risks of impoverishment in situations of sickness, disability, unemployment, old age, general poverty and social exclusion. It covers the rights to work and sustainable livelihoods, adequate food, essential services, and social security. However, only 20 per cent (1 per cent in developing countries and the rest in affluent countries) enjoy social protection... Social protection is part of the social commons, where the commons are essential things that support life and should not be treated as commodities. The commons paradigm is central to the sought-for alternative system that provides for the needs of individuals

and society, and that considers the regenerative capacities of the environment.”

To reclaim social commons in the actual historical situation became an urgent demand going far beyond the traditional agreements of Labour and Capital, claiming social rights as basic respect for the dignity of persons.

The impressive complexity and diversity of theoretic and practical initiatives reclaiming the commons appear in a historical situation of deep crisis. Incontrovertible since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2007 the capitalist system is undergoing a new great transformation (and financialisation is only one element in this process). The traditional relation between capital and labour is at stake, workers rights and social standards are restricted, no more respected or – especially in ‘emerging’ economies – not implemented. The infinite greed of the international speculative circuits on land and natural resources destroys general living conditions for people and produce fatal hunger for the poorest. In this situation defending commons seems to be one of the very few opportunities to defend general living conditions for local and transnational communities all over the world.

But where do we want to go with it? Are we sure to create an alternative path of development? And are we prepared to defend it when it becomes successful? Are we aware of the creativity of capitalism to enclose new initiatives and to exploit them as resources? Let’s take some examples:

We all use widely the communication opportunities of the world wide web and without digital commons the alterglobalization movements and the WSF wouldn’t be possible. But what started as digital commons today is a monopolised industry and the economical use of personal data of users is becoming one of the most profitable industries – and on the other hand the grasp of secret services is destroying all kind of digital self-determination.

In the developing share-economy some commons were introduced to share cars and houses without economic interest – but as these fields became successful immediately new fields of businesses developed as there are UBER for Taxis and AirBnB for houses. And many people offer their services, cars and private houses to earn some money – and give away traditional spheres of private life.

The digital commons and parts of the share-economy show an ongoing change in the relation between private and social life – with fundamental consequences for democracy.

Sure there are commons which do not succeed in terms of capitalist interests - especially in rural areas – but as we know well from history, those parts could be enclosed as a sort of poverty-economy, left apart and existing at the edge of society – and at a given historical moment in danger to be eliminated.

There is a need for strategic debates – and this is not so easy to initiate. We all know about the traps of ideologically driven (left) debates... Even in the history of WSF we find sometimes such outbreaks.

Tunis is an extraordinary opportunity to try to start the debate. Let's use the best we experienced in these years together: the creativity of commoning!

Some recent publications:

Michel Bauwens, www.p2p-foundation.net
The Top Ten of PP Trends 2014

Sumak Yachay – Denenir Sociedad del Conocimiento Común y Abierto –
Design the FLOK-Society, IAEN – Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales
Ecuador, Quito

Action Aid India: The Crisis of Commons, New Dehli, 2014

Degrowth – A vocabulary for a new - Reclaim era, Giacomo d'Alice, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (Ed.), Routledge 2014

International Law for Common Goods – Normative perspectives on Human Rights, Culture and Nature by Federico Lenzerini and Ana Filipa Vrdoljak (Ed.), Oxford 2014

Silke Helfrich (Ed.) Commons, Berlin 2015

www.biencommuns.org - Declaration of Belém – Reclaim the Commons

www.aepf.info - Final Declaration AEPF 10 Milan

Tommaso Fattori, Commons: Towards a legal framework, 2013

Francine Mestrum, Social Commons. Re-thinking social justice in neo-liberal societies. Scheduled for 2015