

Left politics and Commons

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Looking at the picture of the growing Commons-movements in Europe it's time to discuss strategies how to place them on European level: Commons as one dimension of initiatives to reclaim a social, ecological and democratic Europe connected with the reconstruction and democratization of public services. The specific demand is to implement commons as citizens' basic rights and to develop specific laws how to give space to commons initiatives in our societies. Well, it's a long way to go ... A first step would be making the idea visible as part of the public discourse of European Left. And then there are the upcoming European elections in 2019: specific demands for commons could be part of election campaigns.

With this contribution I want to discuss the question how to implement commons as politics in the agenda of the European Left. First mentioning in a short preliminary remark the theoretical context, then giving some examples for different dimensions of initiatives, asking "what are basic common elements of commons-initiatives". In a third and fourth part I try to identify political proposals for the promotion of commons in Europe.

1. The theoretical context

The question of property is basic for all left politics from it's (organised) beginning in the 19th century – until today. In his theory of value Karl Marx revealed the contradiction between exchange value and use value. And this too is still relevant today. Within these two dimensions of left thinking we find the global movements of the Commons. Francois Houtart says in his basic manifesto of 2011 that Commons initiatives focus on use value, democratic participation and autonomy, being part of a new post-capitalist paradigm (HOUTART, 2011) and in a short note from 2014 he is pointing out: "Concretely, it means to transform the four "fundamentals" of any society: relations with nature; production of the material base of all life, physical, cultural, spiritual; collective social and political organization and culture. For the first one the transformation means to pass from the exploitation of nature as a natural resource (merchandize) to the respect of nature as the source of life. For the second one: to privilege use value rather than exchange value, with all the consequences with regard to the concept of property. The third one implies the generalization of democratic practices in all social relations and all institutions and finally inter-culturality means to put an end to the hegemony of Western culture in the reading of the reality and the construction of social ethics. Elements of this

new paradigm, post-capitalist, are already present all over the world, in many social movements and popular initiatives. Theoretical developments are also produced. So, it is not a “utopian vision” in the pejorative sense of the word. But an aim is necessary to organize the convergences of action. It is a long-term process which will demand the adoption of transitions, facing the strength of an economic system ready to destroy the world before disappearing. It means also that the structural concept of class struggle is not antiquated (fiscal heavens and bank secrecy are some of its instruments). Social protests, resistances, building of new experiences are sources of real hope.” (HOUTART, 2014)

Already in 2009 Toni Negri and Michael Hardt published with “Commonwealth” radical positions, proposing poverty, love and revolution to end the “republic of property” – that is to say capitalism – with the development of commons (NEGRI/HARDT, 2009). Jeremy Rifkin as well agrees in the basic transformation of the global economy by digital processes and commons but without challenging the property question - thus in a reformist way - describing how the emerging Internet of Things is speeding us to an era of nearly free goods and services that leads to a collaborative commons economy growing aside the more and more globally monopolised big capitalistic economies (RIFKIN, 2014).

Whatever we assume, the perspectives are open and it is in our hands which direction they take.

2. What are commons about?

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.

Commons and commoning can be seen as “active processes whereby subaltern organizations and groups of people identify and take control of

resources and manage them in common, i.e. democratically and collectively, not privately or in an exploitative manner” (SCOTT CATO/NORTH 2017). In nearly all parts of the globe, initiatives and projects on commons are on the rise, they strike all four general dimensions of life: nature, land, capital and labour and in most of the cases these four dimensions are interlinked:

Nature: Access to clean water is basic and water as commons is defended from Latin America to Europe to Asia. Ecological use of resources, circular flow economy and rural farming and access to natural seed are existential to fight the destruction of life-conditions for humankind on this planet.

Land: The most prominent case is MST – the movement of the landless in Brazil, who settle on the land of absentee landlords and re-cultivate it. There are numerous initiatives in the Global South where small communities struggle against their expropriation by governments and international investors for big business interests (land-grabbing) and traditionally used nomad-land as commons (as in Mongolia). And all the initiatives in big cities around the world reclaiming social housing-projects are a question of land-property too – as well as the squatting of abandoned houses and old industrial plants for cultural projects.

Labour: 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.

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).

Capital: The exploitative and speculative character of money is obvious. Some communities practise alternative regional or local currencies as simple instruments for exchange. On a more traditional level ethic banking is active in different countries, trying to support ecological and social projects. Not to forget the ambitious project of “Banco del Sur” initiated by

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

7 countries in Latin-America as an alternative development-bank (but until today never came into practice).

And the **5th dimension** is existential for cooperation today: Digital democracy and access to digital means. Open-source software such as Linux, Wikipedia, the Creative Commons licenses, various social media, and numerous online forms of cooperation created a new culture of cooperation. It is a form of the commons adapted to the 21st century — it is the digital commons.

What do commons-initiatives have in common?

So: the actual rise of commons can be seen as acts of resistance against the destruction of life conditions and basic needs. On the one hand they defend traditional commons (as land, access to coastal areas for fisherman and others) and the other hand they create new dimensions of cooperation and conquer new spaces and resources for common action.

Commons realise new dimensions of democratic cooperation, shared use of resources, creative production of goods and services. Often projects start in one specific field and during the realization new ideas and projects like e.g. education or health or decentralized use of renewable energy-sources are developed.

3. Challenges for institutional politics

Besides general proclamations (on UN-level) and implication of Commons on constitutional levels (as in Ecuador and Bolivia) and besides collective actions (as referendums on water show) initiatives are locally centred.

They often are in conflict with the respective institutions and have to fight at least to get some space for action. **It's time to bring this to the light of the public political debate. The challenge for the Left is to implement specific demands for Commons into the struggles for reconstruction and democratization of public services.**

First of all let's sum up elements of successful actions:

The municipal level: most of commons initiatives are local activities, in cities as well as in rural areas. Urban Commons are prominent and well documented. Cities as Seoul (KOR), Barcelona (ES), Naples (IT), Ghent (BE) and Frome (GB) show how to realise urban commons and how municipalities can work together with commoners. There are legal competences too supporting commons initiatives. The Berlin Senate for

example has the right to confiscate abandoned property (but they don't use it yet and there is no obligation for social use).

National level: The movement for Water as a commons in Italy initiated a referendum with the result that 51% of Italian citizens voted for it. The government must act and the Parliament has to discuss new laws – a still on-going struggle. The water-movement is putting the question of Commons in the context of re-thinking the role of the public in the management of goods and services related to the universal human rights.

The “old” left idea, that the State per se would guarantee public services, failed with processes of privatization – and even when the State is still holding the ownership, goods and services are often given to private companies. It is crucial to suspend market-activities from public services to ensure profits in this sector are re-invested for public use. At the same time public services must be democratized and there has to be public control with the participation of workers and citizens to guarantee correct functioning of the common good.

Another case, in Italy too, gave rise to social and cooperative activities like “Libera”. Italian law allows authorities to carry out preventative seizures when mafia involvement is suspected and give them to social or public use. On national levels the laws on social and common use of property and the laws on cooperatives are decisive. Another interesting example is the legal structure of SCOPs in France (“Société cooperative et participative” or “société coopérative ouvrière de production”). 2016 2680 SCOPs with 45 000 active members – and they are still on the rise.

International level: In 2010 the UN general assembly adopted the resolution on access to clean water as basic human rights. The initiative for a fundamental declaration on the Common Good of Humanity goes beyond this – well aware that a proclamation has no legally binding character but can be an instrument for social and political mobilization, creating a new consciousness and serving as a basis for the convergence of social and political movements at the international level. Clearly it is a long-term task, but it needs to be started. Not only can the coming together of social movements like the World Social Forum and political parties like the Forum of São Paulo contribute by promoting such a Declaration, but so can individual countries through their representatives in international organizations like Unesco and the United Nations (HOUTART, SALAMANCA, 2014).

Coming to the **European Level**: Since some European Parliamentarians from different political groups founded an ‘Intergroup’ on Commons and Public Services in 2014, the ‘European Commons Assembly’ developed with participants from nearly all European countries. ECA initiated conferences and various activities and published a general call: “We call for the provision of resources and the necessary freedom to create, manage and sustain our commons. We call upon governments, local and national, as well as European Union institutions to facilitate the defence and growth of the commons, to eliminate barriers and enclosures, to open up doors for citizen participation and to prioritize the common good in all policies. This requires a shift from traditional structures of top-down governance towards a horizontal participatory process for community decision-making in the design and monitoring of all forms of commons. We call on commoners to support a European movement that will promote solidarity, collaboration, open knowledge and experience sharing as the forces to defend and strengthen the commons. Therefore, we call for and open the invitation to join an on-going participatory, inclusive process across Europe for the building and maintenance of a Commons Assembly. Together we can continue to build a vibrant web of caring, regenerative collective projects that reclaim the European Commons for people and our natural environment” (europeancommonsassembly.eu).

How could the common good be important for European politics? Just to remind one of the prominent battles of the Left in the years 2000: the battle against the Bolkestein-Directive. In the end it was possible to introduce the protection of public services as “services of general social and economic interest (SSIG’s) on Europea level. This could be a starting point for initiatives ...

But all these examples show the slightly fragmented situation. The political and legal conditions differ widely and there is a need to discuss demands on all levels – and there is the need to discuss them on the European level.

4. Opportunities for the European Left

In 2019 are the next European elections. As election-campaigns are the moment for public debates on political positions and proposals, this could be the right moment for the Left to take clear positions on commons and to communicate it. What could these positions be about?

The general interest for European Left is to **re-think the role of public for goods and services with relation to universal rights and to prohibit**

market-logic in public services. To suspend market from public goods and services and to democratize public services is crucial – for the recuperation of public services as Common Good. In this context we see commons citizens' initiatives.

In the heart of commons initiatives is the question of property and its misuse by privatisation and exploitation of resources. This is a starting point to develop proposals.

So, it's a two-fold battle – and the question of a new understanding of public services is connected with the question how to introduce commons.

Commons are of general public interest thus the general demand is **political and legal recognition of citizens' initiatives whose aim is to create, re-construct and recuperate resources, goods and services in a social, ecological and democratic way.** There are specific demands to add as there are:

- Cooperative use of abandoned land and houses. Confiscation of private property from criminals and giving it to social use.
- right for workers to recuperate their companies and manage them collectively – before selling them to investors or going bankrupt.
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- open access for all citizens to information-services democratically organised, and Free public internet.
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- democratization of digital radio and tv by reserving e.g. 30% of the slots for non-commercial, community etc. stations.
- participatory recommonalization of energy and water.
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- Collectively and self-managed Funds for citizens' initiatives and access to public funding.

And others ...

There is another rather simple demand introducing the commons-demands into the debates for the European elections. Why not ask all candidates how they want to promote commons-initiatives on the European level. The performance of the actual Intergroup is rather poor and there are only very few MEPs taking the issue seriously.

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