



Politics of the Common

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A central task for reimagining society today is to develop an alternative management of the common wealth we share. In this essay I want to explore two distinct but related domains of the common. On the one hand, the common refers to the earth and all of its ecosystems, including the atmosphere, the oceans and rivers, and the forests, as well as all the forms of life that interact with them. The common, on the other hand, also refers to the products of human labor and creativity that we share, such as ideas, knowledges, images, codes, affects, social relationships, and the like. These common goods, I will argue, are becoming increasingly central in capitalist production -- a fact that has a series of important consequences for efforts to maintain or reform the capitalist system as well as projects to resist or overthrow it. As first approximations you could call these two realms the ecological common and the social and economic common or the natural and the artificial common, although these categories quickly prove insufficient.

I will focus in this essay on the relation between these two domains or guises of the common, especially from the standpoint of resistance and activism. In many but not all respects these two guises of the common function according to the same logic. They both, for example, defy and are deteriorated by property relations. In addition, perhaps as a corollary to that fact, the common in both domains confounds the traditional measures of economic value and imposes instead the value of life as the only valid scale of evaluation. Indeed the divisions between the ecological and the social become blurred from this biopolitical standpoint.

There are at least two essential respects, however, in which these two domains of the common at least appear to be animated by opposite logics. First, whereas many ecological discourses regarding the common focus on conservation, highlighting the limits of the earth and the forms of life that interact with it, discussions of the social or artificial forms of the common generally focus on creation and the open, limitless nature of the production of the common. Second, whereas social discourses generally maintain the interests of humanity as central, many environmental discourses generate a sphere of interest much broader than the human or animal worlds. My suspicion is that these seeming oppositions will turn out, after investigation, to indicate potential complementarities rather than contradictory relations between these two guises of the common as well as between the forms of political action required in each. What I hope to make clear, at the least, though is the need for a dialogue about the different domains of the common, their qualities, and the potential relations between or among them.

My discussion here will be relatively theoretical and I will offer no specific policy proposals but it should be clear that the issues at stake for political thought and action are immediately practical. If you feel the need for a concrete anchor in such an abstract discussion, think of the organizational issues involved in the preparation for the actions surrounding the UN Climate Conference to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009. (See, for example, www.climateaction09.org.) These actions will likely involve a confluence -- with conflicts and challenges, of course -- of ecological activists with anti-capitalist movements and other social movements, which have traditionally pursued separate and sometimes even divergent courses. The success of the event will depend on

understanding and negotiating the differences and potentials of the domains of the common that are the primary objects of each of these movements. This event by no means exhausts the relevance of this theoretical discussion but it does highlight its practical importance.

The theoretical discussion must begin by establishing the centrality of the common. Thinking the centrality of the common is much more advanced and widespread in ecological thought than in other domains. Not only do we generally share the benefits of interaction with the earth, the sun, and the oceans but also we are all affected by their degradation. Air and water pollution are not confined to the location where they are produced, of course, and they are not limited by national boundaries; climate change similarly affects the entire planet. This is not to say that such changes affect everyone in the same way: rising ocean levels, for example, will have a more immediate impact on those living in Bangladesh than those in Bolivia. The common, though, is the basic foundation of ecological thought against which the singularities of specific locations stand out.

In social and economic thought, however, the centrality of the common is not widely recognized. The claim for its centrality relies on the hypothesis that we are in the midst of an epochal shift from a capitalist economy centered on industrial production to one centered on what can be called immaterial or biopolitical production. Toni Negri and I have argued this hypothesis over the course of three books -- *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*. I give only a brief synthesis here.

The first part of the claim is easy: for much of the last two centuries the capitalist economy has been centered on industrial production. That does not mean that most of the workers throughout this period have been in factories -- in fact, they have not. Indeed who works in industry rather than the fields or the home has been a central determinant in the geographical, racial, and gender divisions of labor. Industrial production has been central, rather, in the sense that the qualities of industry -- its forms of mechanization, its working day, its wage relations, its regimes of time discipline and precision, and so forth -- have progressively been imposed over other sectors of production and social life as a whole, creating not only an industrial economy but also an industrial society.

The second part of the claim is also relatively uncontroversial: industrial production no longer holds the central position in the capitalist economy. This does not mean that fewer people are working in factories today but rather that industry no longer marks the hierarchical position in the various divisions of labor and, more significantly, that the qualities of industry are no longer being imposed over other sectors and society as a whole.

The final element of the hypothesis, however, is more complex and requires extended argument and qualification. In short, the claim is that there is emerging today in the central position that industry once occupied the production of immaterial goods or goods with a significant immaterial component, such as ideas, knowledges, languages, images, code, and affects. Occupations involved in immaterial production range from the high to the low end of the economy, from health care workers and educators to fast food workers, call center workers, and flight attendants. Once again, this is not a quantitative claim but a claim about the qualities that are progressively being imposed over other sectors of the economy and society as a whole. In other words, the cognitive and affective tools of immaterial production, the precarious, non-guaranteed nature of its wage relations, the temporality of immaterial production (which tends to destroy the structures of the working day and blur the traditional divisions between work-time and nonwork-time), as well as its other qualities are becoming generalized.

This form of production should be understood as biopolitical insofar as what is being produced is ultimately social relations and forms of life. In this context traditional economic divisions between production and reproduction tend to fade away. Forms of life are simultaneously produced and reproduced. Here we can begin to see the proximity between this notion of biopolitical production and ecological thought since both are focused on the production/reproduction of forms of life, with the important difference being that the ecological perspective extends the notion of forms of life well beyond the limits of the human or the animal (but more on that later).

One can also approach the hypothesis of the emerging dominant position of immaterial or biopolitical production in terms of the historical changes in the hierarchy of forms of property. Before industry occupied the central position in the economy, up to the early 19th century, immobile property, such as land, held a dominant position with respect to other forms of property. In the long era of the centrality of industry, however, mobile property, such as commodities, came

to dominate over immobile property. Today we are in the midst of a similar transition, one in which immaterial property is taking the dominant position over material property. Indeed patents, copyrights, and other methods to regulate and maintain exclusive control over immaterial property are subject of the most active debates in the field of property law. The rising importance of immaterial property can serve as evidence for or at least indication of the emerging centrality of immaterial production.

Whereas in the earlier period of transition the contest between dominant forms of property turned on the question of mobility (immobile land versus mobile commodities), today the contest focuses attention on exclusivity and reproducibility. Private property in the form of steel beams, automobiles, and television sets obey the logic of scarcity: if you are using them, I cannot. Immaterial property such as ideas, languages, knowledges, codes, music, and affects, in contrast, can be reproduced in an unlimited way. In fact, many such immaterial products only function to their full potential when they are shared in an open way. The usefulness to you of an idea or an affect is not diminished by your sharing it with me. On the contrary, they become useful only by being shared in common.

This is what I meant when I said at the outset that the common is becoming central in today's capitalist economy. First, the form of production emerging in the dominant position results generally in immaterial or biopolitical goods that tend to be common. Their nature is social and reproducible such that it is increasingly difficult to maintain exclusive control over them. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the productivity of such goods in future economic development depends on their being common. Keeping ideas and knowledges private hinders the production of new ideas and knowledges, just as private languages and private affects are sterile and useless. If our hypothesis is correct, then, capital paradoxically increasingly relies on the common.

This brings me to the first logical characteristic shared by the common in both the ecological and social domains: they both defy and are deteriorated by property relations. In the social and economic domain, not only is it difficult to police exclusive rights over immaterial forms of property, as I said, making biopolitical goods private also diminishes their future productivity. There is emerging a powerful contradiction, in other words, at the heart of capitalist production between the need for the common in the interest of productivity and the need for the private in the interest of capitalist accumulation. This contradiction can be conceived as a new version of the classic opposition, often cited in Marxist and communist thought, between the socialization of production and the private nature of accumulation. The struggles over so-called bio-piracy in Brazil and elsewhere is one contemporary theater of this clash. Indigenous knowledges and the medicinal properties of certain Amazonian plants, for example, are patented by transnational corporations and made private property, the results of which are not only unjust but also destructive. (I object to calling this piracy, by the way, because pirates at least have the dignity to steal property. These corporations steal the common and transform it into private property.)

In the ecological domain it is equally clear that the common both defies and is deteriorated by property relations. It defies property relations simply in the sense that the beneficial and detrimental effects of the environment always exceed the limits of property just as they do national borders. Just as your land shares with the neighboring land the benefits of rain and sunshine it will share too the destructive effects of pollution and climate change. Although the strategies of neoliberalism have been most visibly aimed at the privatization of the public, in terms of transport, services, or industries, it has equally involved the privatization of the common, such as oil in Uganda, diamonds in Sierra Leone, Lithium in Bolivia, and even the genetic information of the population of Iceland. The deterioration of the common by private property here also suggests a contradictory relation: the private nature of accumulation (through the profits of a polluting industry, for example) conflicts with the social nature of the resulting damages. By putting together the two formulae, then, we can see the contradiction with the common on both sides, so to speak, of private property: the increasingly common nature of production clashes with the private nature of capitalist accumulation and that private accumulation, in turn, clashes with the common, social nature of its detrimental effects.

Numerous powerful struggles have arisen in recent decades to combat neoliberal privatization of the common. A successful struggle that illustrates part of my argument here is the war over water that centered in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2000, which, together with the war over gas that peaked in 2003 in El Alto, contributed to the 2005 election of Evo Morales. The events were precipitated by a classic neoliberal script. The IMF pressured the Bolivian government to privatize the water system

because it cost more to deliver clean water than the recipients paid for it. The government sold the water system to a consortium of foreign corporations, which immediately "rationalized" the price of water by raising it several fold. The subsequent protests to de-privatize the water intersected with a variety of other efforts to maintain control over the common, in terms of natural resources, the forms of life of indigenous communities, and the social practices of the peasants and the poor. Today, with the disasters of neoliberal privatization becoming ever more evident, the task of discovering alternative means to manage and promote the common has become essential and urgent.

A second logical characteristic shared by the common in both domains, which is more abstract but not for that reason any less significant, is that it constantly disrupts and exceeds the dominant measures of value. Contemporary economists go through extraordinary gymnastic to measure the values of biopolitical goods, such as ideas or affects. Often they cast these as "externalities" that escape the standard schema of measurement. Accountants struggle similarly with "intangible assets," the value of which seems to be esoteric. In fact, the value of an idea, a social relation, or a form of life always exceeds the value that capitalist rationality can stamp on it, not in the sense that it is always a greater quantity but in that defies the entire system of measure. (Finance, of course, plays a central role in the valuation of biopolitical goods and production and the current financial and economic crisis derives in large part, I would argue, from the inability of capitalist measurement to grasp the newly dominant forms of production. This is a complex discussion, however, that I have to leave to another occasion.) A central character in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* is a factory owner, Thomas Gradgrind, who believes he can rationalize life by submitting to economic measure all aspects of it, including "affairs of the heart" such as his relationships to his children, but, as the reader quickly guesses, Gradgrind will learn that life exceeds the bounds of any such measure. Today even the value of economic goods and activity, since the common is increasingly central to capitalist production, exceeds and escapes the traditional measures.

In the ecological domain too the value of the common is immeasurable or, at least, does not obey the traditional capitalist measures of economic value. This is not to say that scientific measurement, such as the proportion of carbon dioxide or methane gases in the atmosphere, is not central and essential. Of course, it is. My point is rather that the value of the common defies measurement. Consider, as a counterexample, the much-publicized arguments of Bjørn Lomborg against taking action to limit global warming. Like Mr. Gradgrind, Lomborg's strategy is to rationalize the question by calculating the values involved in order to set priorities. The estimated value of the destruction expected by global warming, he concludes with impeccable logic, does not merit the costs to combat it. The problem is that one cannot measure the value of forms of life that are destroyed. What dollar amount should we assign to the submersion of half of Bangladesh under water, permanent drought in Ethiopia, or the destruction of traditional Inuit ways of life? Even contemplating such questions elicits the kind of nausea and indignation you feel when reading those insurance company schedules that calculate how much money you will be reimbursed for losing a finger and how much for an eye or an arm.

The inability to grasp the value of the common with traditional capitalist measures provides one means for evaluating proposals for carbon trading schemes such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Waxman-Markey bill now being discussed in the United States. Carbon trading schemes generally involve a cap to the production of carbon dioxide gases and other greenhouse gases so as to create a limited market in which the production of such gases can be given determinate economic values and traded. Such schemes, then, do not pretend directly to measure the value of the common, but instead claim to do so indirectly, by assigning monetary values to the production of gases that harm or corrupt the common. I don't mean to discount the fact that in some cases carbon trading schemes can have positive effects in controlling harmful emissions. (Strategic support or opposition to such carbon trading schemes has to be determined through a different kind of argumentation than this and through analysis of the specific situation.) One should certainly keep in mind, though, that assigning determinate values to immeasurable commodities and assuming that market rationality will create a stable and beneficial system has in many cases led to disaster -- see, for example, the current financial crisis. And one should also explore the ways that such property logics and market schemes will not diminish but probably exacerbate the global social hierarchies marked by poverty and exclusion. It should be clear, in any case, that proposals that rely on the capitalist measurement of value and the market rationality that presumably accompanies it cannot grasp the value of the common and address the problem of climate change at the fundamental level, even through such indirect means. Forms of life are not measurable or, perhaps, they obey a radically different scale based on the value of life, which it seems to me we have not yet invented

(or perhaps we have lost).

My primary point here is that just as the different forms of the common both rebel against property relations so too they defy the traditional measures of capitalist rationality. These two shared logics are a significant basis, it seems to me, for understanding both guises of the common and struggling together to preserve and further them. The shared qualities of the common in these two domains, which I have analyzed so far, should constitute a foundation for linking the forms of political activism aimed at the autonomy and the democratic management of the common.

I recognize two important respects, however, in which the struggles for the common operate according to opposing logics in these two domains. The first has to do with scarcity and limits. Ecological thought necessarily focuses on the finitude of the earth and its life systems. The common can only sustain so many people, for instance, and still be successfully reproduced. The earth, especially its spaces of wilderness, must be defended against the damages of industrial development and other human activities. A politics of the common in the economic and social realm, in contrast, generally emphasizes the unlimited character of production. The production of forms of life, including ideas, affects, and so forth, has no fixed limits. That does not mean, of course, that more ideas are necessarily better, but rather that they do not operate under a logic of scarcity. Ideas are not necessarily degraded by their proliferation and by sharing them with other people -- on the contrary. There is the tendency, then, for discussions in the one domain to be dominated by calls for preservation and limits, while the other is characterized by celebrations of limitless creative potential.

In simplistic terms, indeed too simplistic, one might say that whereas ecological thought is against development or for curbs on economic development, advocates in the social and economic domain of the common are resolutely pro-development. This is too simplistic because the development in question in the two cases is fundamentally different. The kinds of development involved in the social production of the common departs significantly from industrial development. In fact, once we recognize, as I mentioned earlier, that in the biopolitical context the traditional divisions between production and reproduction break down, it is easier to see that calls for preservation in the one case and creation in the other are not really opposed but complementary. Both perspectives refer fundamentally to the production/reproduction of forms of life.

A second basic conflict between struggles for the common in these two domains has to do with the extent to which the interests of humanity serve as the frame of reference. Struggles for the common in the social and economic domain generally do focus on humanity and indeed one of the most important tasks is to extend our politics successfully to all of humanity, that is, to overcome the hierarchies and the exclusions of class and property, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and others. Struggles for the common in the ecological realm are much more likely, in contrast, to extend their frames of reference beyond humanity. In most ecological discourses human life is viewed in its interaction with and care for other life forms and eco-systems, even in cases when priority is still accorded to the interests of humanity. And in many radical ecological frameworks the interests of non-human life forms are given equal or even greater priority to those of humanity.

This is a real and important difference, it seems to me, between the perspectives on the common in these two realms but not an insuperable or even a destructive difference. My view is that it is beneficial for those primarily focused on the environment to learn more about and be forced to confront the nature of social hierarchies and the means to combat them, at the level of activism and that of theory, just as it is beneficial for those focused on social struggles to learn more about and be forced to confront the limitations of the earth and other life forms both insofar as they interact with humanity and as they exist on their own terms.

What I hope to have articulated in the course of this essay is how the concept of the common serves to name some of the central issues facing politics today by focuses on two of its domains or guises. (I leave to other occasions to explore the nature of the common in other domains, including that of identity and identity politics, for instance, or in the context of social institutions such as the family and the nation.) Struggling over the common and inventing alternative means to manage it are fundamental for any project to reimagine society today. The divergences between struggles oriented toward different guises of the common need to be articulated and negotiated, but these differences are healthy in my view and engaging them can only carry us forward. That is one reason I want follow the preparatory discussions and the organizational efforts for the actions at the UN Climate Summit I mentioned earlier, which will bring together environmental activists with

anti-capitalist movements and other social movements. Discussions on issues such as these are often most productive and advanced furthest, after all, through the practical and theoretical forms of co-research conducted among activists in movements. I'm anxious to learn what they come up with.

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