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THE PRODUCTION OF COMMONS

To talk about political recomposition is not only to raise the issue of the *overcoming* of divisions within the struggling body. It is to problematise these divisions as object of our overcoming, in full awareness that these cannot be overcome by abstract and ideological calls for unity or brushed aside by theoretical frameworks that dismiss their ongoing reproduction through the application of capital's measure and value practices. The problematic of overcoming division is one with the problematic of the production of commons.

It seems to me that the question/problematic of commons *emerges* and must be posited at a point/moment of *division* of a struggling body, at whatever scale of social action. It is at that juncture that the ability to problematise the commons and recompose struggles on that new terrain allows the struggle to move forward onto a new plane, to climb a step in the ladder of the fractal panopticon and contribute towards extending the articulation among struggles. This, of course, does not mean to call for unity, as the socialists do all the time – a unity *not* rooted in real concrete commons that struggling and diverse subjects can produce beyond a hierarchal and divided social body, but predicated on ideology *brought from a metaphysical outside* (the party). To say that at the point of division struggling subjects must seek to produce commons is not to be prescriptive: commons are often produced by struggles, whether an author calls for it or not. Rather it is to warn that the failure to produce commons, while the struggle loses momentum and external pressure to break it up increases, implies ripping apart the fabric holding together subjects in struggle, and the movement flows out in a thousand ripples. This, of course, might all be perfectly understandable, depending on the context: if, for one section of the movement, the price of finding a common is the annihilation of one's desires and needs, it is perhaps better to maintain full autonomy. The time is not ripe for the production of that type of commons. In these contexts, when *articulation* of conditions and desires across subjects in struggles is not possible or carries insurmountable limits, hence

new value practices articulating different subjects cannot be established, the market might even offer the taste of liberation. For many women, the struggle against patriarchy involved getting a job, hence achieving financial autonomy vis-à-vis men. As we have seen in Chapters 5 and 6, capital has of course accommodated that, recoding patriarchy in a new international division of labour and making it necessary to recast the struggle against patriarchy on new terrain.

But we must keep in mind that the production of commons occurs at the point of division within the struggling body, precisely because it is a proactive creation to resist the division of the social body on the basis of immediate *material interests*. The production of commons can overcome these divisions not by ignoring them, but by rearticulating them around new value practices. Indeed, the production of commons to recompose a divided struggling body coincides with what might be called *articulation*, that is the production of meanings.¹ The answer to the context-specific question of how diverse and interconnected struggles can be articulated together is the question of how *common* meanings can emerge. Bearing in mind what we discussed in Chapter 2, that values are the socially produced meanings people *give to action*, the problematic of the circulation of struggle, the question of the effectiveness and organisational reach of struggle, is one with that of the production of *common* value practices in opposition to the value practices of capital.

It is through the production of commons that new value practices emerge and *divide-and-rule* strategies dividing the social body on the basis of material interests can be contrasted. That process of reflection/communication/negotiation aimed at identifying and crafting a specific contingent commons is a philosophy born in struggle, a necessary moment of the production of struggle itself, a philosophy that is grounded, but also that aspires, and hence *develops* a strategic look that helps to make clear what it is up against; hence it has the potential to be a material force 'that grips the masses', because the same struggling 'masses' (i.e., a 'whole' of relating subjects) are the producers and the product of this philosophy. Also, we must recognise that the ability to identify and generate a common means to go to a *deeper* level, the effect of which is to achieve a 'higher' organisational reach, to travel towards the root of things, is to 'kick asses' at the top!

The clash in perspective between a social force that produces enclosures and one that produces commons means this: capital *generates* itself *through* enclosures, while subjects in struggle generate themselves *through* commons. Hence 'revolution' is not struggling *for* commons, but *through* commons, not for dignity, but through dignity. 'Another world is possible', to use an under-problematised current slogan, to the extent that we *live* social relations of different types. Life *despite* capitalism, as a *constituent* process, not *after* capitalism, as a constituted future state of things.

FREEDOM, COMMUNITY ...

Indeed, the beginning of history must be lived, because only living subjects can participate in the constitution of the mode of their interrelation, and the *mode* of relation between individual singularities/fragments and the whole is the central kernel of the problematic of the beginning of history. Only living subjects can work out among themselves the meaning of going *outside* the value practices of capital and its disciplinary markets.

The discussion of capitalist markets as disciplinary does not make them 'good' or 'evil' per se, but simply recasts the problematic of freedom and democracy onto a different plane than 'bourgeois' discourse. Our discussion has simply problematised the fact that markets imply specific forms of social relations and corresponding specific processes of doing, of positing heteronymous measures and of negotiating social norms behind the back of the actual doers, whether waged or unwaged. To individual singularities, capitalist markets are simply what they are, whether they are at the receiving end of a restructuring process that ruins them, or at the cutting edge of an innovative process that allows subjects to embark in a rapid and flourishing career. The fundamental point I have stressed about capitalist markets is that they are a system of social relations that take away from singularities with needs and desires the need to *articulate* things among themselves, since it is the market that does the *articulation* for them, that puts them into relation with each other in given forms and, therefore, through the repetition of feedback processes under the code of the 'law of value', that gives rise to norms of social production. Direct and free articulation, that is the active engagement with others in the production of meanings, values and, ultimately, the creations of *commons*, of parametric centres grounding co-production, is inversely proportional to the pervasiveness of market measures on the life practices of the producers. Hence freedom and democracy must be understood as the freedom and democracy of social individuals. The outside, *our outside*, is the space in which freedom and democracy, by taking on full meaning because they are lived and practised, become highly destabilising of the current social order.

In another little-quoted passage, Marx addresses the question of freedom and democracy grounded in commons, in this subversive sense of the term, as the positing of the 'beginning of history': 'Let us finally imagine, for a change, an *association of free [individuals]*, working with the means of production held in *common*, and expending their many different forms of labour-powers in full *self-awareness* as one single social labour force' (Marx 1976a: 171; my emphasis). There are three elements of this sentence that I believe define 'human history' as Marx understands it as opposed to 'human prehistory'. First, the members of the association are *free* individuals. A freedom that is further qualified by, second, a *self-awareness* of being part of a whole producing and reproducing the conditions of their own life. In this sentence therefore, the

'working' referred to can be better conceptualised in the more general sense of social doing, whether this relates to raising children or building bridges. But the point is that, unlike Hayek's defence of the market order discussed in Chapter 14, this is not the freedom of bourgeois private individuals on the market whose choice is restricted to a selection of items on a *given* menu. Rather, individual freedom *and* self-awareness of being part of a whole implies that individuals are, *and* recognise themselves to be, *social individuals*, members of a community. Also it implies that their freedom not only applies to their individual spheres, but also to the definition of the *context* of their interaction. In a word, the menu is a result of their self-aware freedom, not a given product of their blind interaction as in the market mechanism or, alternatively, the authoritarian imposition of a self-proclaimed workers' state. Finally, third, this freedom of social individuals can be exercised only if the means used to produce their own conditions of life are considered precisely as such, as means, through which the aspirations and needs of human beings are met. This freedom cannot be exercised if these means of production, knowledge, and communication are enclosed. This freedom cannot be exercised if they are the means for private accumulation – accumulation, that is, not as a safeguard for rainy days as in agricultural societies or as precondition for *plotoch* as in 'stone-age' practices. Rather, to use King George Bush II's justification for terrorising Iraq's population into submitting to market reforms, accumulation 'as a way of life', a way that splits the social body, separates production and consumption, and targets these alienated activities with the curse of *boundlessness*. It is in the domain of the shared that limits can be set. For Marx, therefore, means of production, whether socially produced or part of the natural endowment of the context of human life (e.g. water, air, land, etc.), are held in *common*. But if this is the case, who decides what to use and for what purpose? Back to square one: decisions are taken by the association of *free* individuals who at the same time are self-aware as being part of the whole and as constituting a web of relations, decision processes and feedback loops through which the art of social living is constituted. This circularity is not a defect of Marx's argument; on the contrary. I read this as the positing of human freedom as a collective *process* of engagement, which balances roots and creativity, conditions and overcoming. It is the proclamation of human self-reliance and self-determination, understood neither as the abstract idea of a master narrative, nor as the particularist idea of the fragment.

'What a utopia!' one might say. Indeed, for some strange reason, in the English language a hyphen can do miracles. To be a living force, utopia must be able to articulate its twofold dimension: from no-where, we come back down to earth, now-here. And now-here, there are contingent problems of reproducing livelihoods, there are concrete struggles, concrete horizons, concrete conditions of *detritus*, contingent issues, needs, demands and aspirations. In the now-here, there is nothing that theoretical speculations about the

no-where can tell us. But there is contingently defined *detritus*, there is desiring *conatus*, there is naked social cooperation, antagonistic to the extent that capital and patriarchy have pervaded the social body, in which productive communities make decisions and follow practices the effect of which is to threaten the livelihoods of other communities, to turn them into fragments. Now-here the problematic of the beginning of history is the daily praxis of reconstituting communities of social cooperation predicated on different value practices.

This problematic is open. In the sentence quoted above, Marx presupposes and does not explicitly discuss *how* what he calls 'free producers' decide for themselves, what is the mode of their interaction, *what is the organisational form of their mode of social cooperation*. Indeed, he leaves the question open, and in the next few pages following this passage he explicitly makes assumptions only regarding alternative modes of distributions of the products of labour according to labour time (Marx 1976a: 172). What however is clear is that what is hidden and presupposed in Marx's thinking here is the question of *community*, by which I mean the domain of relational modes, the problematic of how *free individuals* who are self-aware as being part of a social body in which they are related to each other, articulate their co-production. Neither Marx nor anybody else could answer this question. Only living social subjects in struggle and cooperation can pose the question of community as part of the problematic of the beginning of history, of *their* history.

What we can say, however, is that the plurality of subjects' struggles in the last few decades in many parts of the world has created a new context within which to reformulate the problematic of communities. The so-called 'single-issue' campaigns have questioned and undermined in society at large norms, values and institutions that meant exclusion, hierarchy, oppression and obscurantism for 'community'. Women struggling on the production, reproduction and interpersonal fronts problematised and rewrote meanings and roles, politicising self-awareness and inclusiveness. The widespread anti-authoritarianism of the 1960s and 1970s longed for respect and disrupted hierarchies. Gays and lesbians 'came out' and disturbed people's certainties about sexuality, opening up horizons and posing the question of relations with the 'other'. Anti-racist struggles faced society at large with the question of equal rights, respect and dignity within the social body. Indigenous struggles amplified the demands for dignity, autonomy and self-reliance, and forced the issue of respect for non-mainstream, non-Western forms of knowledge. The contemporary struggles of migrants inside the European metropolis is exposing the third world in the first as well as the hypocrisy of governments which make 'human rights' their reason for going to war but yet put migrants in detention camps to regulate their access to their labour markets. Decades of environmental struggle have made us aware of our natural context, of our being part of nature, and of the need for us to be responsible for each other, for other

species and for the ecosystem, however we want to problematise that 'responsibility'. Farmers across the world reclaiming land, demanding respect, have helped us to make the link between what we eat and how we produce, and how this is the basis of what we are.

In retrospect, all these struggles, which not long ago many 'revolutionary socialists' at worst dismissed as secondary and at best tried to subordinate and co-opt to the priorities set by self-delusional leaders, have produced a cultural milieu that envelops *detritus* and make possible not simply the conception, but also new practices of local and translocal *communities* outside the value practices of capital. Responsibility for the whole, but also dignity of the parts understood as autonomously positing *their own* measures; trust for the 'other', but also critique of *one's position within the whole*; inclusiveness of needs and aspirations, but also respect for different voices; participatory horizontality of political processes, but also definition of priorities; urgency of action, but also time for communication: these, in my experience, are all dynamic principles that are emerging in the many relational fields of *community*, and in networks and webs springing out of the universe of the alter-globalisation movements.

... AND COMMONS

The opening up of *communities* to the value practices embedded in diverse struggles creates the precondition for helping us to posit the question of community of producers, of *how* we engage in social reproduction, how we relate to each other, at every scale of social action. But this relational field of community always presupposes and, through social practices, gives rise to *commons* around which the activities of the subjects are articulated. Every mode of doing needs commons. Indeed, to pose the question of commons is simply to recognise the social character of our doing, the fact that individuals are *social* and hence they *must share something* (language, land, sea, air, values, etc.); and, at the same time, what is shared is the result of a social co-production. Different modes of production differentiate on the basis of *how* commons are reproduced and of *what* are commons and what are not, which is to say, how communities of producers relate to each other. Thus, in capitalist production, each 'community' of producers (in private or state companies, or cooperatives), is pitted against others in an endless race to succeed *and/or* survive in the market. Through this antagonism, they reproduce the common conditions of their livelihoods. They are also locked in a structural drive for money; they all share rules and practices that reproduce their antagonism. Money, or the desire for money, is their common, a common still reproduced by the actions of communities, as *all* commons are, but in such a way that the product-thing of human action (money) command the doing of the co-producers. This upside-down world, the other side of which is generally analysed in terms of commodity fetishism, alienation and abstract labour, is at the same time

a world in which the relations between commons and communities are disjointed, because for capital what is common (the product of social production) can only appear as private, as appropriable, as the means of accumulation, as the condition for some community of producers to take advantage of *other* communities of producers.

A different understanding of commons is re-emerging from the webs and networks of the alter-globalisation movement. Indeed, many of today's struggles deployed against global neoliberal capital contain several demands for *commons*. On issues of land, water, knowledge, electricity, social entitlement, education, health, nature, habitat and others, a large variety of struggles longs for recomposition and articulation with others, within the same locality and around the world. There is an increasing awareness in these networked movements that the general question of alternatives to neoliberal capital must involve some form of end (as well as *reversal*) of enclosures, and consequent establishment of commons. But it seems to me that the struggles of various social movements in the last decades has also made clear that 'commons' and 'communities' are interlinked, that is that the dimension of *what* is shared and of *how* is shared must go hand in hand. Hence, the great emphasis, in many interesting sections of the movement, on questions of direct democracy, on the exploration of new modes of horizontal decision making; and the fascination with indigenous practices of consensus decision making and, in general, with horizontal practices as an ongoing laboratory of co-productions.

In these movements there is also general awareness that commons do not necessarily mean 'the state'. In other words, that the alternative to the antagonistic and alienated community of the market is not what Marx calls the 'illusionary community' of the state. The demands for new commons spring from the search for a way forward, away from ideological constructs, and requiring wide participation in decision making.

From this account, the beginning of history therefore seems to pose itself as a problematic defined along two main coordinates: commons and communities. In this sense, the beginning of history is the beginning of the *constitution* of the thinking and praxis that look upon the world's fragments as free and dignified voices, and the whole of their interactions as 'objectal' – that is, under the form of object – rather than objective – that is, independent from the subjects.² While apologists for neoliberal globalisation pose the intersubjective global interaction as *objective*, as a reality individual fragments *must bow to* and that is independent from subjects – and this is false of course, precisely because states, transnational corporations, global economic institutions, and so on are the creators of this objectivity – to put the interaction among the fragments as *objectal* means not only that the fragments/singularities pose the question of their self-awareness of the form of their interaction, but it is a problematising self-awareness, one that poses the question of the overcoming of existing exploitative, oppressive and alienating forms of social interaction.

ANARCHISM, COMMUNISM AND SOCIALISM

Self-awareness. To begin the journey of self-awareness is not to recite a doctrine, a credo, a belief. Rather, it is to confront the meanings we deploy in the articulation of our practices to those of others, and to problematise them. Let me exemplify this journey of self-awareness, starting from the mythological home of the writer going to demos (and readers can of course exemplify for themselves, by starting from their own mythological homes, and dissolving the identities frozen therein by measuring them in terms of their process-like meanings). In the many marches and rallies, and debates in social centres and bookshops, in many parts of the world, we fly flags with different labels, symbols and colours. Three classic terms come to mind at this juncture, three concepts describing three ways of being implicated in the battle to overcome capital: anarchism, communism and socialism. Too often these terms have been regarded as brands requiring our loyalty and thus producing identity walls that divide the struggling body. Instead, I understand them as describing horizons of practices and processes of decoupling, and *not* as ideologies, models or brands.

Anarchism is about anti-authoritarianism; it is the belief that we can organise co-production on a voluntary basis, with no coercion, neither that of the market nor that of the state, and that we can take decisions together horizontally, democratically, non-violently. Anarchism is the principle that gives form to the mode of government we want to have over our lives, which is self-government, autonomy and freedom. Anarchism is the fun part of *our outsides*, and its subject is plural and diverse: a multitude of subjectivities.

Communism is about the practice of self-government, a process of co-production, so to speak, which involves the sharing of resources held in common among members of a community (or communities) who, for this reason, engage in relational processes to shape their norms and values. Communism is the relational part, to each other and to nature, constituting *our becoming outsides*. Its subjects are local and translocal communities.

Socialism is about ... Chavez, let us say ... governing capitalism through the state in such a way as to facilitate the increase in the degree of anarchism and communism among us all and then see what happens. Socialism is, for most of us, the theatrical part – it could be a farce, a drama, a tragedy or a comedy. The subject of socialism is always the illusionary community, bearing in mind that illusions bring results that are sometimes good and at other times devastating.

Anarchist practices without communist practices are individualistic or ghettoising. Communism without anarchism is hierarchical and repressive. Anarchism and communism without socialism, that is, without a struggle within/against/beyond the state, are fantasy (I do not say utopian, because utopias are not fantasies to me). Socialism without communism and anarchism is neoliberal.

I believe that within the many movements comprising the alter-globalisation movement there are many who seek to find ways to articulate anarchist, communist and socialist practices and overcome the ideological divisions that have characterised the history of anti-capitalism. Their practices of co-production of space—commons, such as the *encuentros*, or within social forums, are also a demonstration that these three horizons can come together to create common spaces, common meanings and values.

Yet, when I reflect on these horizons with respect to the measure of the enemy they are confronting (capital's value practices) I notice that it is 'communism' that seems to capture for me what goes on at the front line. The way I use this old and battered term is not as an ideology, but as a web of *value practices* that, thanks to the anarchist influences of self-government, cannot be defined, that escapes definition by individuals, parties and 'great leaders' and that is a '*real* movement which abolishes the present state of things' (Marx 1976c: 49); hence it abolishes capital's value practices, and hence, because the latter are constituted through organised political violence (the state), it must find ways to struggle within it (socialism), against it (anarchism), and beyond it (communism). But since by value practices we are talking about forms of livelihoods, co-production, I cannot conceive any abolition of the present forms of co-production without *at the same time* conceiving alternative forms of co-production. Therefore, I can only conceive communism in the same general way as I conceive capitalism, as ongoing process and articulation among singularities, predicated, of course, on *opposite* value practices. In this sense, communism is an ongoing practice of self-definition by individuals and communities who take matters into their own hands in the reproduction of their own livelihoods, and hence posit new norms and values of social co-production. Communism is the realm generated by the commoners striving to get outside of capital's value practices, into the realm of lived democracy and freedom.

Communists therefore are not those who 'fight for communism', as if communism were a fixed thing, a fixed set of rules, of norms we could fight for. There is nothing static in communism understood as social force; all of it is dynamic, flowing and relational, because the commoners create it. Communists are those who take part in the value struggles we are *all* involved in with awareness that alternatives linking our particular struggles to those of others can only be constructed beyond enclosures and beyond disciplinary integration. These, as we have seen, are really the bottom line for the preservation of the social force we call capital and the social system articulating clashing value practices that we call capitalism. Communists in this sense are not enchanted by the parables of reform or revolution, since neither of these is the point of the beginning of history. The point is to live a different type of life, linked to others and to nature through different value practices.

The only difference between communists and any other struggling subjects whatever their identity, is that communists confront capital while holding a

mirror in their hands. The alternative to capital, at whatever scale of social action, is a social force that creates a world within the space defined by that reverse image: the image of commons and democratic communities instead of enclosures and market disciplinary integration. Communists are those who seek to create alternative ways to meet needs and follow desires at whatever scale of social action, wherever they are, knowing that the means can be shared, while the goals and the modes of doing that those means make possible can emerge from direct engagement with the other. Just as the social force we call capital seeks to preserve itself by extending and defending enclosures and the realm of the markets, so the social force we call communism can preserve itself only by extending and defending the realm of commons *and* grass-roots democratic processes and practices. The bottom-line ground within which to problematise alternatives, or the beginning of history is, in my opinion, all here.

But since enclosures and sites of disciplinary integration are almost everywhere, then their mirror image, which we have called the beginning of history, is also everywhere. Because, when you look at it systemically, as feedback mechanisms, there is no more split between individual and society, agents and structure. There is no split between 'in here' and 'out there'. Our split personalities, the contradictory roles we are called to lead, the schizophrenic oscillations in modes of doing between Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, in which the same *body* is called to act along conflicting value practices – as when we work under the imperative of meeting capital's measure when we know that this measure clashes with our own measure of things – reveal what Marx calls the class struggle to be as much a struggle within individuals as a struggle among groups in society. Communism in this sense is a social force of progressive decoupling from the monetary circuit of capital, and this can only be done through progressive extension of commons *and* corresponding communities. The beginning of history is everywhere and promises conviviality and abundance. The only thing that prevents us from being part of it is our needs and desire for it and the effectiveness of our powers, that is the organisational reach of our needs and desires. But the discussion of this cannot be part of this book; an author must be silent when the topic is a matter of concrete articulations to the other, concrete processes of constitution. These are rather a matter of strategy, networking, affects and community in specific contexts; they are a matter of free individuals seizing the conditions of production and reproduction of their own lives, and no theoretical generalisation is adequate to describe what ultimately is the flow of life as lived by beautiful free subjects. The beginning of history must be lived, otherwise it is the end of it.