

## CHAPTER 12

# Making Politics Meaningful: The Pitfalls of the ‘Commons’ and the Importance of Anthropological Analysis

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### The political significance of the commons

In the past few years a lively discussion regarding the so called ‘commons’ has taken place within certain political circles and movements in Greece but also around the globe. Firstly – and for reasons of political consistency – we must admit that the subject of enquiry introduced here does not entail a new theoretical discovery or a new field of social activism. The so called ‘commons’ is a subject related to common goods and the institutions via which they are utilized and distributed within our societies. In fact, it concerns the social relationships which are inherited, created, called into question, transformed, or even cease to exist depending on the moment of human history.

It is therefore probably wise to avoid the ostentatious use of the term ‘commons’ – seemingly as a neologism – as it is deceptive and runs the risk of becoming worthlessly sensationalist and inane. In this sense, a conversation dealing with the ‘commons’ becomes meaningful and interesting only if it revives the historical issue of social transformation of the public agenda, as it has been historically and politically set by the social movements of the last

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centuries. This is exactly the political significance of the ‘commons’: the effort of people to reclaim their agency and self-regulate their lives as well as the public –‘common’– space, by going against the existing heteronomous social structures.

Naturally, the matter of correlating the self-regulation of the commons with the existing political conditions arises at once. Hence, we must engage with the more general subject of politics and the meaning we assign to it. Everything included in the term ‘common goods’ –such as the use of natural and cultural resources, technology, law, the concept of property, and even the binary of public / private itself– is associated with our beliefs regarding the concept of the citizen as well as with our daily social activity. As a result, the elaboration of new theories concerning the ‘commons’ demands (and necessitates) the re-examination of the present societies’ political context and of their potential to be radically transformed. Before proceeding to some comments on the subject (which will be unfortunately brief due to the size of the present enquiry), we will note some general political observations, which might prove useful in the current era of unprecedented general flux dominating both words and actions.

### **An anthropological overview of the crisis**

It should be very clear to all who think about politics that politics is not defined as the professional occupation of certain executives, specialists, or experts on public matters. Nor is it limited, obviously, to representation and to the passive handover of power from the many to the few or the handling of current affairs through oligarchical institutions, such as, to name an example, political parties. On the contrary, it should always be emphasized that politics is precisely the disruption of such passivity. Politics is defined as the active and constant engagement with the commons and the direct participation in making and implementing decisions concerning public life. Such participation should occur in every domain of life: from our neighbourhood and workplace to a broader co-operative organization on a local or nationwide scale. Naturally this kind of organization cannot be realized within the existing institutional framework which maintains passive representation, but only within new democratic institutions which will promote agency and equality.

Yet what is the current situation in modern western societies? On the one hand we are experiencing a deep crisis, not merely financial but in essence socio-political and moral. This fact is now a generally accepted truth. On the other hand, however, we are in the middle of an unprecedented anthropological annihilation of the western societies (a phenomenon that has been gradually developing in the past few decades), which constitutes both a cause and at the same time a symptom of the present crisis. What we are referring to here is the especially problematic social organization of people, i.e. the general narcissism and common conformism that certain sociologists –such as

Christopher Lash, Richard Sennett and Zygmunt Bauman— have discussed and which perpetuates the phenomenon of political apathy. To be more specific, contemporary societies are in a state of complete disorientation, and incapable of finding a way out of their standstill: crisis of representation, rise of social inequalities, delegitimation of authority, loss of meaning (Castoriadis 2010).

Under such conditions, the attempts that we can observe to shift towards even more oligarchic societies, which on certain occasions resemble the practices of the mafia (the example of Greece is in this case characteristic), is not a symptomatic or impermanent development. Nor is it simply the consequence of such and such a ruling political party's momentary choices. It is, nevertheless, fuelled by the decrease of political resistance and the lack of social sensitivity that characterises a fundamental part of the population.

The expression 'lack of social sensitivity' demands, of course, further clarification. At this point we should explore the real effect of the neoliberal policies adopted in recent years. A series of 'innovations' (e.g. those promoted by political personnel) such as technocratic governments, full incorporation of all kinds of 'specialists' into public affairs, an authoritarian manner of governing that circumvents the primary principles of the parliamentary system itself etc. seem to clearly ensure the remission of political pathologies that greatly defined past governments. The aforementioned shift towards oligarchic societies does not necessarily mean, however, that we are heading towards a radical institutional transformation, i.e. towards unparliamentary regimes or fascistic policies. This is the reason why the adoption of slogans referring to 'dictatorship', 'totalitarianism' or 'state of exemption' indicate a great degree of naivety, since in this way every political criterion and categorization is undermined for the sake of a rambling 'hyper-revolutionary' rhetoric. Besides, with a government of left origins, such as that of SYRIZA, it has become apparent that there can be a 'smoother' or social-democratic (and in no way fascistic or reactionary) way to apply authoritarian austerity policies.

But presently what seems to be the crucial issue is the possibility of people reconsidering the significance of each political system in relation to their own lives. In fact, our general perception concerning the commons and social solidarity is called into question. Thus, when we grow accustomed to every transgression and depreciation of a statute, we are inevitably eased into a collective nihilism that rejects more or less any collective action or common project and encourages opportunism, according to the logic of 'every man for himself'. The process of losing any sense of social sensitivity is thereby entrenched. The new political scenery fosters the existing (and ever emerging) general politicisation of the population. The previous attitude of indifference for the commons is gradually replaced by the logic of technocratising politics, i.e. limiting ourselves to finding the best person (whether trustworthy or socially 'prestigious') to save us from the political and financial predicaments with which we are faced. In other words, whereas the *nouveau riche* and the consumerist middle class of the past used to depend upon antagonism in order to claim the best positions

in the system (whether through bribery or through personal relationships and political patronage), nowadays this antagonism tends to develop into social cannibalism in order to endure and stay unaffected by the crisis.

So, as the political problem we are facing is serious, we must face it with all our seriousness, as the response to the modern authoritarian political transformation must not be a mere defensive stance. A cry to defend the public interests against privatizations or the relinquishing of rights is destined to become fruitless rhetoric as long as it does not encourage an opposition to the technocriticism of the commons as described above. Consequently, any discussion regarding the commons should transcend the binary opposition of public/private, at least as a point of reference or as the horizon of our political direction. This is not because we do not favour the public in many aspects of social life, but because referring to it can be a very treacherous, political pitfall if the meaning of the term is not radically reinvented in the minds of the people.

We are confronted with similar problems when approaching the issues from the angle of self-organization and acting socially through horizontal structures. They are, of course, largely positive and politically tenable, both as practices and values, but the peril of applying them to a clearly instrumental framework is apparent. The adoption of horizontal structures and institutions of direct democracy should always develop together with a deep questioning of the existing social conditions. Herein lies the significance of anthropological analysis that we need to practice if we wish, naturally, to move towards a revolutionary direction, towards a truly different society that has progressed beyond capitalism. The goal, therefore, is not to intervene in the system ‘morphologically’, through methods of self-organization, but to criticize not only the hierarchical structures, but also the individual constituents of the institutions and of human activity in general. Let us consider briefly how revolutionary instances such as the direct democratic operation of the trade unions can be when they fight for better though uneven wages and better though lopsided (depending on the professional group) working conditions. Or how positive for the project of emancipation the self-organization of the modern capitalist technique and science is. We will proceed to present some characteristic examples which reveal the depth of the problem.

### **Modern technology and overcoming the limits**

In order to render our analysis of the ‘instrumentalism’ of the commons comprehensible, let us examine an issue which is often presented as crucial: the use of technology and more specifically of the internet. No matter how long we discuss the legal context and property on the one hand or the distribution of knowledge and the democratic potential of the internet on the other, the respective analyses will always remain incomplete as long as we do not address the issues of the structure and content of the medium itself. Unfortunately,

analyses often focus on the subject of a commodity's property, in this case the commodities of technology, without referring to the public's actual stance towards the medium.

Renowned sociologist Richard Sennett (1977), referring to radio and television, insightfully comments that mass media has greatly increased people's knowledge about social activities but significantly diminished their ability to turn this knowledge into political action. This valid argument is equally true regarding the case of the internet, as also in this case visualization, the playful nature, and the temptation to infinitely collect information eventually affect the technology user in a stupefying way. This seems to be the main effect on the average human. Let us consider this simple example: How much time would we gain to engage with the commons if we did not on a daily basis aimlessly waste so much useless time online or how many of our thoughts would be converted into political actions if we were not so numbed by our immoderate online commenting and narcissistic verbosity. Consequently, even if we are working using a 'free software' or if we are sharing the whole world's knowledge and data equally, the reality at the end remains ruthless: *information does not amount to freedom and knowledge is a necessary but certainly not sufficient prerequisite for the development of critique and for the emancipation of people*, since the qualitative element of the tyranny of the useless and the trivial surmounts the quantitative element of boundless information and directs people towards an abyss of utter inertia.

Similar problems are apparently caused by the unquestioning faith in new technologies and innovations that are conquering our world nowadays. Probably the most characteristic example is the recent trend of 3D printing. This invention is promoted and advertised as revolutionary based on the argument that the production of commodities can become, to a certain degree, personalized and move from a 'corporate' to a 'personal' level, thus becoming more 'familiar' and 'monitored'. But it is easy to understand that 3D printers only seem to democratize the production of commodities. In fact, this technological innovation does not alter in essence almost anything in the relationship between man and commodity. At least the relationship is not altered in a positive way. Indeed, it could be argued that it contributes to a kind of alienation in the following way: as it provides an almost magic sense of being the 'producer', the user is captivated by this productive power and his consumerist manias are reinforced. This is because discussions never entail questions as to what we wish to produce, why we need the product, how much is enough or how much is too much. Who ultimately sets the limits? Or rather, is it perhaps the case that such technological innovations offer us the opportunity to not think about the limits? Do they merely succeed in intensifying our already prevalent mass consumption hysteria? In this way, the 'power' to personally design a commodity soon turns into a playful, yet uncreative imitation of mechanical and calculating methods, an illusion of a limitless autonomy of producing and consuming. Therefore, the 'reform' of the technical procedures is also in this case

insufficient and what is needed is a re-evaluation of the content of the technical system itself as well as of the consumerist constants and models it provides, a subject, which can be further discussed and greatly analysed.

## Conclusion

Returning to the more general political framework, we would finally argue that nowadays our primary objective should be the conflict with the liberal approach to politics, i.e. with the approach that prioritizes individual welfare and allows only for the power of the few to define limits (financial, political, ecological etc.). To limit the power of others or even to set the rules in the management of any commodity by the few is completely different to being allowed to manage these commodities ourselves via institutions of our own. So the problem is the following: in politics (in making and implementing decisions) and in social life in general (work, the production and management of commodities, use of technology, culture etc.), we have not considered the fact that a truly public management of the commons demands a brand new institutional framework of public participation and a brand new content of human creativity. Naturally, these institutions would not only provide the possibility of equal participation but would impel (or even compel!) the public to claim control over the commons. These institutions will construct a new anthropological type, correspondingly democratic, who will in turn constantly claim this participation.

Certainly, there is no absolute gap between the modern liberal world and a democratic society with an active public participation. We do not suggest, nor is it the right time for Manichaeism and absolutism. Nevertheless, whatever the first step might be, we should not retreat or distance ourselves from the horizon of a more radical criticism in politics and herein ultimately lies the meaning of this enquiry.

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