

DISCUSSING THE COMMON(S) IN NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM: FROM ONTOLOGY TO POLITICS

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Abstract

This article intends to think the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and the common(s). First, it tries to define the common both in ontological and political terms, stressing the similarities and differences between the common, commons and common goods. Then, it characterizes their relationship with neoliberal capitalism in terms of *dispossession*, *expropriation* and *configuration*. Finally, it discusses if the common can be thought as an alternative form of cooperation and self-government with regards to neoliberalism and to what extent it can be posed as a complete alternative to the state.

Introduction

In the last decades, the common has emerged as a key issue both in theoretical and political terms in a global scale. Not surprisingly, this emergence coincided with the violent imposition of neoliberal reforms and governmentality. That is why, following different approaches to this matter, I try to think this relationship between neoliberal capitalism and the common in terms of *dispossession*, *expropriation* and *configuration*. On the one hand, neoliberalism implies a radicalization of capitalism itself, which from its very beginnings has commodified and expropriated the commons and continues to do so, searching for new realms to colonize in order to guarantee its expansion, hence producing a second great enclosure of the commons. On the other hand, neoliberalism can be understood as a governmental rationality that aims at transforming society and subjectivity into a polymorphic enterprise that has competition as a norm for action. In the following, I will try to define the common and characterize its relationship with neoliberal capitalism in order to discuss if the commons can

be thought as an alternative form of cooperation and self-government with regards to neoliberalism.

1. Ontological considerations on the Common

In recent years, the common has been widely discussed not only in ontological terms but also in terms of common goods and the commons.

The ontological reflection in authors like Jean-Luc Nancy and Roberto Esposito has understood the common as a constitutive dimension of our being, stressing the relationality of our worldly existence. In Esposito's account, an etymological archeology has helped in clarifying what is at stake in the common through an interrogation of community. In romance languages, the notion of community derives from *communitas*, which is formed by the combination of *cum* (with) and *munus* (*officium* -a public task-, *onus* -duty-, *donum* -gift-). In that sense, Esposito defines *munus* as a mandatory gift and *communitas* as a form of potentially conflictual relationality that is traversed by the obligation to give or expose oneself to others. Accordingly, Roberto Esposito (1998) opposes the common to any form of the *proprium*, and therefore to any identitarian and exclusive form of community. Hence, the community cannot be thought as something that belongs to us or an entity to which we belong. It also should not be thought as a positive entity but as a concave space of relationship, since there is no positive or stable foundation for our being-with. At the same time, it implies that the common has to do less with subjects of rights and property than with the obligations or duties (*munera*) towards others that expropriate us, preventing us from remaining as closed selves, since we are constitutively exposed to each other. However, modern politics and philosophy, with sovereignty, private property and negative freedom at their core have sought to immunize society towards any form of the common. Life is therefore protected through its own negation. (Esposito, 2002)

Beyond Esposito's own account, these anti-essentialist and anti-identitarian considerations enable us to think the common as something that is not given, but built together. Even if we recognize that ontologically any being is always-already in common, the historical configuration of the common depends on human praxis, as in the constitutive ontology of Hardt and Negri (2009), based on the potentialities of human production, which has the common as its condition of possibility and its result (vid infra.). In a similar sense, departing from

ontology to politics, Dardot and Laval, who also recover the etymology of *communis*, stressing the public dimension of the duties involved, define the common as a political principle of co-obligation towards those who take part in a common activity. (2014) Far from the idea of having an ontological duty, this political definition of the common allows us to connect philosophical reflection with political struggles and theories of the commons and common goods of our era in which our obligations towards others imply a certain degree of reciprocity and involvement in a common project or activity.

2. Commons and common goods

In fact, the reflection on common goods, both material, like natural resources, and immaterial, as culture or knowledge, has been reinvigorated in the last decades in which they have been under threat. In the already cited Roman tradition, common goods (*res communes*) were those that could not be appropriated and/or were open to everyone (like the air, water, oceans, and coasts). No one had the right to exclude others from access to these goods. They differ from *res nullius*, which is something that has not been appropriated yet, and which is the way liberalism will later consider any kind of goods that don't have a private owner. On the other hand, *res* does not always imply a material thing, it rather refers to the matter that is at stake. Hence the relevance of political, juridical and religious institutions to define what things are common, i.e., not appropriable.

One can find this ambivalence in the relationship between *commons* and *common goods* before the advent of capitalism. Then, the term *commons* referred to lands and resources to which the peasants and the poor had access and right to use before the enclosure of those lands (timber, lands for pasture, etc.) and also to the people and institutions that managed the common resources.

This complexity is absent in 20th century economics, which focuses on the intrinsic nature of the resources, distinguishing four types of goods in terms of exclusiveness and rivalry. A good is *exclusive* when its owner can impede access to any person who doesn't buy it at the requested price. A good is *rival* when its acquisition or use by an individual diminishes the quantity of the good available to other people. Therefore, we have *purely private goods*, which are exclusive and rival (like a privately owned motorbike); *purely public goods*, which are

neither exclusive nor rival, like the air so far; *club goods*, which are exclusive and non-rival, like a concert; and *common goods*, which are non-exclusive but rival, like open pastures or fisheries, in which it is difficult to regulate access and usage unless rules are established.

Although these kinds of distinctions are too focused on the intrinsic properties of the good at stake, they helped in clarifying the debate about the tragedy of the commons, put forward by neo-malthusian biologist Garret Hardin as a metaphor for population growth in a world of limited resources. In his famous essay, Hardin maintained that self-interested and rational individuals will behave towards common resources as open pastures like *free riders* who will try to benefit from them, making others pay the costs.

Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. (Hardin, 1968)

Hardin's theory was actually showing how individual rational decisions can lead to irrational outcomes, like the depletion of common goods. However, the only solution he envisaged was privatizing the resource or establishing "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected", (Hardin, 1968) that for him implied the intervention of public authority. In the following years, this theory had impact not only in the realm of demography or biology, but also in neoliberal economics, as an irrefutable proof that privatization was the only answer available against free riding and inefficient use of common and public resources.

Nonetheless, two decades later, Elinor Ostrom (1990) showed that Hardin's theory was wrong since social agents do not necessarily act following their immediate self-interest and also since users can make arrangements in order to manage common-pool resources, which may include "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon", as Hardin suggested, but without the need of an external, bureaucratic agency. Ostrom explained that Hardin's assumption of no communication between agents, as in the prisoner's dilemma in game theory, had nothing to do with the reality of common-pool resources, in which conditions of access and use can be established, that Hardin confused with unregulated and open access. In fact, as we will discuss later, the real tragedy of the commons

from the birth of capitalism to our days had less to do with their immanent unsustainability than with their expropriation by market forces with support from the state. Accordingly, Ostrom and her school elaborated a theory on the functioning of common pool resources based on several empirical studies of different commons that survived and still thrive around the world (from lobster fisheries in Maine to open pastures for milk/cheese production in Törbel, Switzerland, from fisheries in Turkey and Sri Lanka to irrigation systems in Spain and Philippines), seeking to understand and theorize about the motivations social actors have in order to manage certain resources collectively and which are the institutional arrangements that enable their successful management. Accordingly, most contemporary scholars maintain that no good is common by its intrinsic properties. Rather, it is the institutional framework, juridical rules, available technologies, and social practices that make them such (Vercelli & Thomas, 2008).¹

In this sense, Benjamin Coriat maintains that a commons exists only when there is: a) a shared resource, b) modes of access and rules for sharing it, and c) a form of governance of the resource that enforces the rights of access to it (Coriat, 2015).² Therefore, there is no commons without commoners, since it is collective action that defines the common, the rights attached to it, and their forms of management and conservation. A commons is defined not by a good in itself, but by the system of reciprocal rights and obligations between participants and their capacity of enforcement. For this author, the political thought on contemporary commons refers to the works of Ostrom and her school, that includes their studies on informational and knowledge commons, and the works of Stallman and the hacker movement on free software, that include works on copyright, open source and public domain. In this sense, the movement of the commons would be a form of resistance and an alternative solution to representation and exclusive property rights, coinciding with the movement of free software and free culture, with the creation of rules of General Public License, Copyleft and Creative Commons. (Coriat, 2015). In the latter, the right

¹ In this sense, like with human genome, “new technologies can turn into exhaustible what was “infinite” and into excludable what was not possible to be enclosed”. (Lafuente & Corsín, 2010: 20)

² These same dimensions can be found in the account of David Bollier (2014) and the Metropolitan Observatory of Madrid.

of property is subverted, since it is used not to exclude but to include people who can access, enrich, and modify the good. As Stallman stated, *copyleft* uses copyright laws so that instead of being a means to privatize software, it is a means for keeping it free (Stallman, 2002: 22). These principles of sharing and inclusion have inspired licenses that go beyond software, which for some imply the possibility to reconquer the right of property for the commons. (Orsi, 2015) In a similar line, Rifkin (2014) maintains that the commons of knowledge, internet, energy, etc. in which cooperators build an open and decentralized architecture are much more efficient and sustainable than private or public property, leading to a society of zero marginal cost, in which sharing economy starts to replace forms of production and consumption based on competition and exclusion.

However, we should not be blinded by the perspectives that focus mainly on the economic efficiency of a sharing economy enabled by technological development, digital networks, and a new hacker ethics of labor and cooperation. On the one hand, “traditional” commons that are linked to subsistence economies with dense social ties and are under siege by state and private violence have little to do with the digital commons. On the other hand, the commons are not a technical solution to social problems but part of a contingent field of struggle in its aims and results. In fact, not only most commoners are not trying to overthrow capitalism or the neoliberal state but also sharing economy becomes every year a greater source of profit for private companies and of huge savings for public agencies. Hence efficiency and emancipation are two goals of the commons that not always coincide (Ibañez y De Castro, 2015). That’s why Caffentzis and Federici distinguish between those *commons that are coopted* by State and Capital which obtain free labor from the former, *commons that produce commodities* (like the aforementioned cheese and lobster producers) and *commons of civil society* from *anti-capitalist commons*, whose goal is to create an egalitarian and cooperative society beyond market and state, formed by the association of free producers, self-governed and organized to ensure the satisfaction of people’s needs and wishes. (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014)

This political dimension is essential to understand the struggle between the common and its commodification. Indeed, economic efficiency is not necessarily the main goal of enclosures. On the contrary, they have always sought to destroy the autonomy and self-government of the commoners, transforming them into atomized and heteronomous subjects available (or forced) to enter

capitalist relations. In this sense, this renewed reflection on the common is tantamount to a thinking of politics, cooperation and production as alternative to both capitalism and liberal politics. (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2001) As Gutiérrez Aguilar states, in many parts of the world, communal property of land is not a remainder of premodern times but part of a horizon of practices and senses that make possible the reproduction of life in a collectivity that assumes the autonomous, self-regulated and self-determined capacity of deciding on matters that have to do with its symbolic and material production. (Gutiérrez & Salazar Lohman, 2015, pág. 20)

In a similar vein, Sandro Mezzadra (2008) proposes that we should not conceive the common as something given and assume that “the common must be produced by a collective subject capable in its own making of destroying the bases of exploitation and reinvent the common conditions of a production structured around the synthesis of freedom and equality”. This goal is clearly opposed to neoliberal capitalism which relation to the common we will now seek to conceptualize.

3. The common(s) in neoliberal capitalism

To a great extent, the politics of the commons reemerged with such impulse in the neoliberal era as a response to the new wave of enclosures and the multifarious subsumption of life to capitalism. In this sense, following some of the main perspectives developed in the last decade, we synthesize the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and the commons in terms of dispossession, expropriation and configuration.

Dispossession implies a form of wealth accumulation that privatizes public and communal resources and commodifies realms that were exterior to the market, through violent means like military force and juridical coercion. This form of accumulation, which was theorized by Marx as primitive accumulation, is recognized by many contemporary scholars (De Angelis, 2001; Mezzadra, 2008; Harvey, 2003 & 2005, etc.) as an ongoing process that reenacts the enclosures of the commons under new conditions. As reminded above, the first great movement of enclosures introduced into the emerging capitalist production the lands that were open to a communal use and declared consuetudinary rights of commoners to harvest fallen branches of trees and wild fruits as robbery. Most importantly, they enabled the production of producers, since the

bills of enclosure of lands and clearing of estates, together with the harsh laws against vagabondage obliged the peasants to populate the cities and incorporate to the nascent industrial production, forming the modern proletariat (Marx, 1906).

Actualizing Rosa Luxembour's reflections on Imperialism and the continuity of primitive accumulation, Massimo De Angelis (2001) and David Harvey (2003; 2005) maintain that far from being a superseded historical stage, primitive accumulation is inherent to capitalism, in which the separation of producers from their means of production is constantly reenacted. When capital finds difficulties for its reproduction and accumulation, it recurs to the methods of primitive accumulation that deepen the privatization and commodification of the common. This new wave of enclosures by neoliberal capitalism was theorized by Harvey as *accumulation by dispossession*, which:

include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations (...); conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights (...); suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession. The state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes. To this list of mechanisms we may now add a raft of techniques such as the extraction of rents from patents and intellectual property rights and the diminution or erasure of various forms of common property rights (such as state pensions, paid vacations, and access to education and health care) won through a generation or more of class struggle. (Harvey, 2005)

With this notion, and following Duménil and Lévy, Harvey points out that the main goal of neoliberalism was to reestablish the conditions for capital accumulation and restore the power of economic elites after thirty years of Keynesianism. In many parts of the world, this expansion of new enclosures and dispossession by neoliberal governments implied massive privatization of public enterprises and public services, a new impulse to extractivism (mining,

land grabbing, etc.) in many cases at the expense of communal lands and their inhabitants, and the ever growing weight of both public and private debt.

To sum up, the notion of dispossession reminds us that real subsumption of labor power under capital and capitalist accumulation goes hand in hand with a violent process of commodification of practices and goods that were exterior to it. It implies both the dispossession of material commons -like with land grabbing, privatization of water supplies or mining-, as intellectual commons, -like with biopiracy, data mining and copyright extension-. However, in Harvey's account it seems that the difference between primitive accumulation and dispossession is that while the former opens the way to expanded reproduction and therefore can have beneficial effects for people who is now included in capitalist economy, the latter refers to the destruction of opportunities engendered by capitalism itself. In this sense, Harvey maintains that not every struggle against dispossession is in itself progressive. Even though this distinction is legitimate, it presupposes a progressive character of true, productive capitalism based on expanded reproduction and exploitation that would be interrupted by dispossession. However, we may ask if the distinction between real industrial capitalism and fictive financial capitalism that it seems to presuppose still works. If it doesn't, then we should not separate exploitation from dispossession and class struggle from those struggles in defense of the commons to later find a dialectic bond between them, as Harvey seems to do. (Lazzarato & Alliez, 2016)

In a similar sense, assuming the prevalence of rent over profit, Hardt and Negri refer to the *expropriation* of the common. For them, the common is formed by “the common wealth of the material world—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty—which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together” and “also and more significantly those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth”. (2009: viii)

These authors share Harvey's assertion that the “main substantive achievement of neoliberalization (...) has been to redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income” (Harvey, 2005: 159). However, they maintain that critiques of neoliberalism in terms of dispossession focus too much on the expropriation of existing wealth but don't offer a proper account of the production of new wealth in contemporary capitalism, i. e., the organic composition of capital in

which the key element is the productivity of living labor. For them, dispossession may explain the fate of natural commons and public enterprises. However, the artificial common, where there should be no scarcity, would be the key to understand biopolitical exploitation, since it is held to be the main realm of production and extraction of surplus value. For these authors, with the intellectualization, informatization and affectivization of labor, wealth is produced immediately in common. If in the Fordist phase of capitalism, productive processes and social life were submitted to the rhythms of disciplinary institutions and *general intellect* was concentrated in fix capital, in postfordist capitalism the hegemonic sector would be the cognitive one. In this sense, general intellect, as the main source of increases in productivity and relative surplus value, is not mainly objectified in fix capital anymore. Rather, it resides in the decentralized net of singularities that cooperate with ever greater autonomy from fix spaces, rhythms and forms of organization by the corporations. Hence, the common is produced and reproduced by a multitude of affective and cognitive workers who are expropriated by a rentistic apparatus that captures and vampirizes autonomous social cooperation and common wealth through what economists call “positive externalities”, which is a mystification of the common (2009: 141), like in cases of gentrification of popular neighborhoods, or the use of commons-based peer-produced software by big companies that benefit in that way from unpaid labor or even in the case of biopiracy.

In Hardt and Negri’s account, these externalities show the contradiction between capital’s need of the common to create new wealth and the obstacles produced by the strategies of control it imposes on its development, reducing the productivity of biopolitical labor that needs an open access to the common. This expropriation of the common that destroys it occurs in two main ways: intensively, by “segmenting or draining the common bases of production” and extensively, by “privatizing the common results”. (2009: 145)

However, this idea of an autonomous social cooperation can be misleading, since there is also a production and *configuration* of social cooperation that coexists with dispossession and biopolitical exploitation. Therefore, we should speak of a *controlled autonomy*, since neoliberal governmental rationality organizes modes of being, thinking, acting, desiring and producing through a process of incitement based on strategic knowledge and discourses. The norm of competition and maximization traverses State, society and subjectivity, creating an entrepreneur of the self that is responsible for its success and failure

(Foucault, 2004). For neoliberal rationality, everyone must partake in the competition between human capitals autonomously, without feeling coerced to do so by an external agency. *Self-exploitation* (Han, 2015), which is the result of induced precariousness and the dispositif of *performance-enjoyment* (Dardot & Laval, 2013), is the ultimate utopia of neoliberal governmentality.

Therefore, even if the common is constantly produced in neoliberal society, it is submitted to the logic of competition and maximization, whose ultimate goal is unlimited accumulation of capital. In this sense, Pierre Sauvetre maintains that neoliberalism radicalizes the power to impose norms on every form of social life that incite the autonomous cooperation of workers, consumers, and users in order to produce social goods that are then appropriated for free by corporations and public administrations. (Sauvetre, 2015: 283) That's why Dardot and Laval (2014) maintain that even if privatization and looting of common goods is undeniable, we cannot reduce the functioning of today's capitalism to processes of enclosure and dispossession in a narrow sense. Neoliberal capitalism also introduces new relationships of dependency and submission, modifying social relationships, identities and subjectivities. In that sense, neoliberal governmentality seeks to transform every social relation, submitting social reproduction and life to the extended reproduction of capital through the norm of competition.

Hence the importance to think the common not only as an alternative form of production in the spaces the state and the market don't intervene, or as a principle capable of undermining capitalism from within, but as a political principle of co-obligation and reciprocity that enables the institution of self-management and self-government. A principle or political rationality that represents a clear alternative to a society based on competition and commodification, and that should contaminate every social realm in order to redirect our energies towards autonomous goals.

4. The struggle for the common within and against the State

Bearing in mind this relationship between neoliberal capitalism and the common, it is not surprising that the commons have become a major field of struggle against dispossession but also in the construction of relationships amongst human beings based on "autonomy, the re-appropriation of common goods",

and “the reconstruction of a sense of justice and respect” (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2008, págs. 35-36)

As most perspectives on the common, Gutiérrez Aguilar’s advocates a form of social coexistence that differs from the modern state synthesis, which is organized through the delegation of political representation and founded in the predominance of surplus value and competition, which in turn are based on the private property of wealth that should be common. (2008: 18-19) In this sense, she maintains that emancipation implies changing the social configuration by generalizing a mode of social relationship based on the use value of things and the free association of people for autonomous goals. In this view, the struggle for the common is a struggle for social, economic and political emancipation, which implies limiting private property and political representation to their minimum expression, promoting economic self-management and political autonomy and self-government. Shall we conclude then, as also Hardt and Negri seem to think, that the common is an exclusive alternative to capitalist market and state, liberalism and socialism? Is its relationship to the state the same as with private property and market forces?

In our view, it would be theoretically and strategically mistaken to conceive the State as an autonomous and invariant entity. To be sure, the modern state has emerged in a symbiotic relationship with capital. Along modernity, it has been mostly part of its war machines and an agency that enabled the commodification of the commons. It also assumes many social functions in order to create positive externalities for Capital. However, as a field of struggle, it can become a key player in the protection and promotion of the common and the wellbeing of vast majorities. For instance, as a result of worker’s struggle and the threat of communism, in most western countries a welfare state had to be built. At the same time, scientific knowledge and information as commons in complex societies usually need the support of the state in order to develop. Maybe internet is the most famous example, but also public education or scientific research that promotes knowledge as commons need the support of the state in order to thrive, and are not by chance under siege by neoliberal policies. Something similar can be said about other common goods, in which the state must either manage them or recognize and protect legally the autonomy of the commoners to avoid the expropriation by market forces. In this sense, “the social state could be understood as the form in which contemporary socie-

ties manage common goods related to matters like health, security, education or transportation”. (Rendueles & Sábada, 2015: 44)

Therefore, rather than thinking the state as a Universal and Immutable entity, we should acknowledge its historical and geographical configurations. In the last resort, it is a vicissitude of governmentality (Foucault, 2004) and a field of struggle. With this assertion, I am not implying that the commoners must renounce self-government and advocate liberal representation. Rather, the rationality of the common should contaminate the state and all kinds of local and global institutions in order to enable the possibility of a different kind of politics and of life, since at stake is what kind of life we want to live.

This complex relationship between the public and the common can be seen in Latin America, since it has been a great laboratory of neoliberalism and also of political resistance and attempts to build an alternative both from above and below. During the '90s, when neoliberal reforms were introduced everywhere, producing a social debacle of unemployment, poverty and exclusion, different social movements emerged attempting to resist neoliberal reforms, both materially, by searching ways to survive to them, and politically, creating new forms of collective action, protest and institutions. These movements anticipated the general rejection to political representation that gained momentum in many countries by the end of the decade, first in Venezuela and then in Argentina. After that, the political forces which wanted to rule these impoverished countries had to take into account the demands of social movements. In the 2000s neo-left, populist or progressive governments in the region, some of which were the outcome of politics from below, had in common the production of social inclusion or citizenship through a new generation of rights and access to consumption enabling the emergence of a new middle class in some countries where it was historically very narrow. In order to do so, they recovered the participation of government in the control of strategic resources and in the promotion of economic growth with social inclusion, instituting plans against poverty, building public infrastructures, and providing social services, while recognizing the rights of autonomous, peasant or indigenous communities to manage their common resources. For instance, Bolivian Constitution recognizes the plurinationality of the country and communal property of indigenous communities while that of Ecuador recognizes the right to good living (*sumak kawsay*). However, this growth and inclusion was financed by a new wave of extractivism in a classical sense, which had not only “dramatic environmental and social

implications in terms of dispossession” but also in the broader sense of exploiting a social cooperation not directly organized by capital. (Gago & Mezzadra, 2015). In this sense, despite having a critical discourse towards neoliberalism, understood in terms of privatization and growth of public debt, they relied heavily in a subordinate position in the world market as providers of raw materials in order to obtain a rent and redistribute it. In most cases, it also implied the erection of strong and hierarchical leaderships that seem at times irreplaceable.

No wonder that a great part the autonomist left has experienced this process of political construction as a cooptation of social movements by a hierarchical apparatus that neglects their autonomy and accelerates capital’s expropriation of the common. Accordingly, many respected intellectuals and activists that took part in the struggles against neoliberal governments, have been fiercely critical of these experiences, opposing plebeian democracy to the rule by the new professionals of the State. (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2008: 38)

Even though these critiques are for the most part right and legitimate, and recognizing that the neo-development politics of these countries opened new areas of commodification, we cannot deny the enabling effects these experiences had in the daily life of millions of people and the potentialities that open up when basic services and infrastructures become public.

With this, we are not advocating for the acceptance of the existing political forces as the ultimate horizon of our political expectations nor am I implying we cannot criticize these “progressive” governments. However, if the state is not going to crumble anytime soon, and if the politics of the common are not going to be reduced to local and isolated experiences, the state becomes an indispensable partner of the common in complex societies in order to guarantee access to education, health, transportation, security, etc. Therefore, the commoners can establish a strategic relationship with the state in order to promote the formation of new commons. A federation of the commons both in economic and political terms might entail a process of building alliances from below in order to enable an alternative political rationality, based on use value, self-management and self-government. However, not only we should act locally and think globally. We also must act and think strategically in order to avoid any kind of solidarity with the neoliberal forces that expropriate our common resources, creations and possibilities if we are to build a different political rationality and institutions.

To conclude, maybe a realistic politics of the common should avoid state phobia and build a strategic relationship of conflict and negotiations with the state in order to counter neoliberal governmentality and the ever growing forms of violence towards populations and nature, and promote the formation of new commons. Therefore, the struggle for the common in complex neoliberal societies can be understood not just as a way of delinking social cooperation from every existent institutional framework. Rather, it could be understood first and foremost as a struggle within and against capitalism, and therefore within and against the state.

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