Emancipatory Commoning?

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In this response to the *Common Conflict* [www.onlineopen.org/common-conflict] questionnaire, architect and theorist Stavros Stavrides contextualizes the popularity of commons discourse on an ongoing redefinition of 'the public.' He states that commoning practices, insofar as they are informed by concrete social experiences and embedded in specific historic conditions, can provide valuable tools for post- or anti-capitalist struggle. Stressing the importance to the commons of openness to 'newcomers,' he claims that art should be re-appropriated as a crucial field of commoning.

It seems that 'commons' has become a new catchword in discussions about the global economic and cultural crisis. This word sometimes fuels a peculiar metaphysics of human community-making, combined with politically correct remarks on human nature. However, the rise of debates about the commons (including the use of common recourses and the forms of control of relevant practices) draws from an important source that keeps on generating experiences and arguments throughout the world: the implicit and explicit crisis of the state as a form of social organization that supposedly guarantees society's well-being. What people actually experience in a variety of ways is that the public realm has now either been handed over to 'the market,' or is under the control of state mechanisms that secure the interests of the ruling elites, rather than any 'public good.'

Privatization itself is a crucial part of this appropriation of the public by elites. In neoliberal capitalism, 'the state' and 'the market' – or the 'public sector' and the 'private sector' – are thoroughly complicit, rather than opposed. In many confrontations with the state and with privatization mechanisms, people are reclaiming public facilities and public spaces as commons. This is a potentially widespread process of redefinition of the 'public,' beyond and against its current forms. People in the Latin American periferias, inhabitants of the European banlieu-type suburbs, marginalized rural populations which try to live in hostile contemporary metropolises, refugees and immigrants who don't feel a stable ground under their feet: all of these have many reasons to believe that the 'public' does not include them.

Discussions on commons, therefore, may be considered to employ interpretations and ideas that directly reconfigure the common ground on which collective interests and communities can be based. This is why 'commons' is not a neutral term: it has to do with the values attached to any potential reinvention of community bonds and forms of collaboration that is propelled by the legitimization crisis of the state and state-like forms of organization including most national political parties and bureaucratized unions as well as the multileveled institutional structures of global capitalism. The boundaries of such debates and the issues at stake are obviously not always clearly defined. Practices of collaboration may be very well connected with redefinitions of a so-called 'active citizenship' which either involves practices of philanthropy-replacing-the-welfare-state or processes of neo-communitarian separatism.

Insofar as they are informed by concrete social experiences, debates on the commons can provide valuable tools for anti- and post-capitalist politics. Emancipatory politics may indeed profit from struggles for and through commoning as long as forces and scopes of commoning are socially contextualized and thoroughly compared. What seems to me most important is to distinguish between practices that create open communities of commoners and practices that tend to circumscribe closed communities either of shared privileges or of shared miseries. In order to be able to support potential relations of social emancipation commoning has to be open to 'newcomers.' Not simply as new members in a community of already established rules and habits but as co-producers of those rules and habits. Any form of protective enclosure of commoning communities (or of communities-as-commons), no matter how necessary for the protection of fragile or threatened sharing relations, has to be temporary: enclosures kill commoning, sooner or later. Barricaded strongholds of otherness reproduce mentalities of separation and division and not mentalities of equality and solidarity.

Emancipatory commoning, thus, is a process that has to do with specific historic conditions and is necessarily always in the making. To keep alive the power of commoning we need to support its expansion: in new areas of collaboration ('goods,' ideas, services) and by including new people, new potential commoners. This may be accomplished by corroborating a crucial characteristic of commoning (considered as a process that may build new forms of social organization): the sharing of power. If commoning was and should be based on sharing, on 'goods' to be shared and on rules of sharing, then the sharing of power is the prerequisite of any kind of sharing that is based on equality and solidarity. Without the sharing of power, without, that is, forms of participating in the organization of a society that are not structured by a permanent distinction between 'those who govern' and those 'who are governed,' commoning will not contribute to any kind of emancipatory project. A community of commoners may possibly generate racist or sectarian attitudes as long as power relations are shaped through the establishment of hierarchies. Examples may vary from religious sects to cultural and political groups based on the lethal fantasy of the 'chosen ones' (including Nazism, Fascism, Zionism, nationalist fundamentalisms, self-proclaimed avant-gardes, etc.)

A second point might be that any form of dispute between open communities of expanding commoning cannot be solved with means that are hostile to commoning (considered as a process based in the sharing of power). Thus, state-like or army-like forms of organization cannot be considered as possible means or intermediaries in such disputes. If commoning may sustain emancipation processes then in commoning, as in every aspect of those processes, means should look like ends.

What is to be shared through equalitarian and expanding commoning is redefined and perhaps reinvented in the process. 'Commons' are not actually 'things,' 'goods,' etc., but socially meaningful entities that are shaped in relations established through commoning. In this prospect, art may indeed be considered as a field of human production and interaction that can be potentially shaped by commoning relations. Artistic practices and objects are normally being defined as such through processes connected to the development of hegemonic values and dominant ideas. If, however, we consider art as a prominent field for developing counter-hegemonic aspirations and counter-dominant visions for society, then art should be re-appropriated as a crucial field of commoning. It is not a matter of sharing what is already recognized as art but of choosing to rethink, to reevaluate and to perhaps remake what is taken and appreciated as art. This is how artistic work may gesture toward the discovering of new ways of being in common. If art may be a field of experimentations that expand and challenge established patterns of feeling and thinking, then the practice of art-as-commoning can possibly explore patterns of feeling and thinking shaped in common.

Both the production and the reception of art will be transformed if a work of art is to be considered as a common good rather than a good that supports acts of distinction and is connected to symbolic or economic capital accumulation. Actually, commoning the arts will contribute to the blurring of boundaries that separate art's production and reception. Artists-as-commoners and commoners-as-artists: creativity may possibly overspill the boundaries of art through commoning.

Potentially emancipatory commoning should not be confused with a process of homogenization. Commoning has to do with the opening of communities toward newcomers and with an always expanding ethics of sharing. Commoning, thus, is necessarily open to difference. Commoning dies in the enclosure of identities, in its reduction to a process of identity sharing. Commoning should not be in the service of any identity-as-enclosure.

Art, thus, may indeed become a propelling force of commoning. Art may be reinvented through commoning as a means to explore difference – potential difference – as a means to learn from differences and play with differences as long as equality and solidarity are not cancelled. Perhaps through art we can better learn how to be open as commoners without being open to what threatens commoning. How this may happen is of course difficult to describe in advance. Let us accept that art involves risk. Art is and should be both a collective and a personal adventure. And aren't commoning practices, aspiring to be egalitarian and expansive, also open to risky but worthwhile adventures?

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