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The Commons & Collective Resources

From defence against private management by liberalism and from bureaucratic management by the State to direct management by the producers

Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici

1 November 2010

Historians recognize the privatization and consequent fencing in of common or community lands (known as the commons) in 17th-century England as one of the fundamental processes leading to the industrial revolution. As a result of its gradual fencing in, the land which the law of usage had established as being for collective use by the rural population, was transformed into private property by means of special laws, the Enclosure Bills, and was henceforth used particularly for intensive sheep farming, the wool from which was to become the raw material for the new textiles industry. The wave of poverty that followed lasted several centuries.

However, lands in common use have not entirely disappeared. To date there are still parts of the territory used collectively: land, pastures, forests, water sources, rivers, lakes and seas; collective resources that provide raw and secondary materials essential to human survival.

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And also the struggle around the commons has not disappeared, nor has the push to privatize them. Indeed in the current period of harshening liberalism, the tendency to “fence in” has increased. And this trend has even expanded the battle not only to land or natural resources, but also to a very wide range of goods and services necessary to the existence of humans and for their collective welfare.

Today in the terms commons and common resources, in fact, we need to count not only the natural resources that have existed since the dawn of humanity, such as the land for pasture or crops or the seas for fishing, but also a whole set of public goods created by human forms of organization, aimed at the overall welfare of the individual and at the satisfaction of both the material sphere and the “intellectual”.

Today we can distinguish three different categories of commons.

The first category includes those collective goods which, besides being materially quantifiable, provide the elements essential to our physical survival: water, essential to the biological life of all living species; the forests, as a source of energy and raw materials for various products; the seas, rivers and lakes for fishing and navigation. The following also belong to this category of commons: local knowledge, seeds selected for centuries by local populations, the genetic heritage of humanity and of all species of plants and animals, biodiversity.

Although these assets may be bought and sold, they are not commodities, and access and the right to enjoy them according to one’s needs is in reality a right which is unavailable to every individual. We must fight against capital’s demands to continue to hoard and further privatize these assets, fight attempts at bio-piracy and patenting at the expense of local communities, demand the right of every human being not to be dispossessed of access to the natural resources that would enable a decent life. We need to defend and extend the right to self-production, something which can in-

waste and highlight their distance from the real needs of the users of the resource.

At that stage we can begin an experimental process of competition in territorial management of the resource against not only the liberalist offensive but also the institutional bureaucratic apparatuses, leading to a form of dual management that would inevitably lead to contradictions in terms of power struggle.

It is certainly a long and difficult process but it would be an experiment in how to “liquidate” the State on the ground.

protecting their privileges over the rest of the population and reproducing their condition as a privileged “class”, and in mixed private-public regimes, where indeed the mismanagement is more marked, in terms of cost and quality of the resource, by the corrupt relationship between public managers and entrepreneurs.

Moreover, the establishment of an “impartial” bureaucratic apparatus as collective resource manager, introduces additional costs, not only in monetary terms (and therefore more in a capitalist sense), but in terms of energy balance (something the huge bureaucratic apparatus of Russian State capitalism knows about, as one of the reasons it imploded was the heavy expenditure required to maintain it).

However, we should also be aware — since the history of yesterday and today teaches us — that the management of collective resources and commons by liberal capitalism, compared to State management, produces a further deterioration of the material life of the working class and of the poorest, as the private element introduces a clearer, sharper commodifying differential in the collective resource.

In a historical period where we are witnessing a fierce liberalist attack against the commons and collective resources, we believe that as Anarchist Communists we must devote ourselves, together with the local committees, to limiting the liberal offensive as much as possible.

And within these committees, we have to propagandize our ideas on the management of collective resources: self-management and direct control of all vital resources of a territory by the local bodies of producers.

Working within local and national committees that are created to defend the commons from capitalist speculation, we must at the same time propose horizontal forms of organization to the workers; these organizational forms can exercise control and be actively critical of public bodies and operators so as to unmask bureaucratic

tegrate income but protect and defend from standardization and consumerist subjection.

The second common category of commons includes the global commons, not quantifiable in units of resources: the atmosphere, climate, the health of the environment, the oceans, the store of human knowledge and all those goods, such as the Internet, which are the product of collective creation.

These goods cannot be bought or sold, but the rapacity of capitalism is responsible for their progressive decline and they need to be protected from capitalism by fighting against the outsourcing of environmental and social costs produced by capitalism.

The third category of commons is that which can be defined as public services, historically variable and the outcome of economic development and of the class struggle, which are concerned with the basic needs of citizens. These are services such as water supply, electricity, transport systems, healthcare, education, social security and all that goes under the definition of welfare.

These goods must be defended from the attack capitalist which, at a time when the social struggles are on the back foot, sees an opportunity to recover, possibly with interest, what it was forced to yield in more favourable times. By converting rights into services, the erosion of the welfare state contributes to a return to increasing poverty and blackmail. Fighting to defend the right to housing, healthcare, mobility, means not only earning more income but also winning more freedom and dignity.

While capitalism has always justified expropriation — by the few of the resources of all — under the pretence of the scarcity of the resource itself (the commons are held to have a physical constraint with regard to quantity due to their limited nature; in order to avoid running out of the resource itself or the occurrence of congestion which would reduce, even so far as to annul, the usefulness of the resource itself, access to and the use of the resource must be lim-

ited¹), the opposite of privatization as a collective resource management model has always been presented as being nationalization, that is to say the direct management of resources by the State, according to the model whereby the existence of an external umpire outside and above individual interests would ensure a rational use of resources, limiting egoistic, anti-collective behaviour.

But history teaches us that both are wrong.

In the first model, what is the difference between indiscriminate, unregulated exploitation of the commons and exploitation of the commons as the private property of an individual or group of individuals? Only the number of egoists, which would be high in the first case and only a few or even one in the second. In this management model, the incentive to conserve the resource would be economic profit, the scientific maximization of selfishness.

Private management transforms a collective resource into a simple commodity to be traded on the capitalist market, thus subject to the laws of profit and the speculative whims of the market.

The current financial concentration lies behind the privatization of multi-utilities and effectively removes from public control resources and management of essential services such as waste, energy and water resources, formerly under municipal management, putting large amounts of money in the hands of financial capital. This transformation on the side of financial capital is essential for the redefinition of investments in energy supplies, waste-

¹ This thesis lies behind an article written in 1969 by biologist Garrett Hardin, entitled “The Tragedy of the Commons”, whose reasoning is based on the thesis that the weakness of the idea of the commons lies in the very freedom of use by anyone; thus any individualistic and selfish use would prevail over the collective and would definitively compromise the commons.

In fact, Hardin says that the very fact that there is free access to the commons and that there is no way of limiting the number of users leads to a situation where the rational behaviour of each of them can only cause the degradation or destruction of the resource itself, since they are trapped in a tragedy of freedom based on an irresolvable conflict between individual interests and collective interest, with the inevitable dominance of the former over the latter.

to-energy plants and investment in building new nuclear power plants, via the great waste business, with a managerial management style which on the one hand rules out any kind of political control over materials which was until recently believed to be public and on the other uses general tax revenues with contributions that can be written off, vital to the sustainability of the proposed operations.

And the ruthless law of the market, with competition between private individuals, forces them to keep the cost/benefit ratio as low as possible. For the community this translates into an increase in costs to be paid in the form of bills, taxes and/or shares, depending on the type of asset (increase of the benefits for the private operator) and in a worsening of the service (reduction of costs for the private operator).

With the private management of the commons, the community – and especially its most economically disadvantaged sector – pays a steep price from the point of view of environmental well-being, as many commons, such as the climate, atmosphere and the ecological sphere as a whole, are subjected to various types of pollution, exploitation for the sake of profit.

To summarize then, the private management of the commons leads to a progressive deterioration of the physical environment and the growing exclusion of sectors of the poor population from the benefits of their usage.

In the second model, proposed by many Marxist economists, we have many examples where the management of common resources and commons by the State or its territorial expressions (Regions, Provinces, Municipalities, etc.) produces inefficiency and general mismanagement of the resources themselves.

The reason lies in the fact that the operator, represented by the bureaucratic State apparatus, central or decentralized, inevitably wanders far from the demands and needs of local communities.

This occurs both in a context where State Capitalism exists, where the “class” of bureaucrats spend its energies above all in