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Beyond Economism

The Prospect of the Commons

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The paradigm of the commons represents a radical break with this logic. By embedding different social and economic practices into the everyday life of participating individuals and communities, it internalizes the economy into the whole of society. The role of technocrats and experts is made obsolete. In a sense, it dissolves “the economy” into autonomous economic practices, which can be experimented with and changed separately, in contrast to “grandiose” models like capitalism or socialism.

Thus the commons provides us with the opportunity for a different expression of popular anger and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Unlike the forms of resistance that have dominated revolutionary movements for centuries, such as electing “radical” governments, fighting over the seats of power, or trying to destroy every last bit of the present system and then start anew, the commons offers a different paradigm. It allows people to express resistance through creativity, by building, in the here and now, new forms of sharing and coexistence based on fundamentally different core principles such as direct democracy, trust, solidarity and dignity.

Today, the economy is located at the epicenter of our lives, on a social as well as an individual level. This has created an ideology which is responsible, to a large degree, for the crises we are facing today. A solution could be the eradication of the hegemonic role of economics and its internalization into democratic and ecological political projects.

Nowadays the social imaginary is being successfully modelled in the framework of economism. We can say that everything is being subjected to the economy and its basic engine — the paradigm of constant growth. Local communities, nation-states, entire populations, and nature are being subjected to the will of “all mighty” markets. Our habitat (cities, homes) as well as the way we think, are being narrowed along economism’s basic principles. The Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, with his critical stance towards economism, described this logic as the idea of “rational mastery of the unlimited expansion of economy and technology on nature and society”.

Karl Polanyi, for whom humans are social creatures and economic activity takes place in, and because of, social contexts, criticized economism’s approach. According to Polanyi, Marxists and classical liberals alike, were guilty of an “economistic fallacy” — separating economics from other fields of human life and reducing those aspects and fields to mere aspects of economics.¹

Although today the power over the dominant system is situated in the hands of the Right, we can see that its main competitor — the Left — is entrapped in the imaginary of economism as well. According to Castoriadis, by placing the economy at the centre of politics, Karl Marx adopted capitalism’s model of homo economicus.² Both the Left and the Right view the economy as something separate

¹ Margaret R. Somers, “Karl Polanyi’s Intellectual Legacy”, *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi* (Black Rose Books, 1990); p. 152

² Evangelos Papadimitropoulos, “Socialisme ou Barbarie: From Castoriadis’ “Project of Individual and Collective Autonomy to the Collaborative Commons”, *Triple C Journal* Vol. 14, No 1 (2016): p. 267

from society, to be governed by the most suitable managers. Both therefore dismiss the idea that a fundamental change needs to take place in the relationship between the economy and other spheres of existence.

To a certain degree this explains the attitude of many on the Left towards the narrative, imposed on us by the authorities, that the contemporary politico-economic model is extremely “decentralized”, if not “anarchic” or even chaotic. They propose instead to return to the big bureaucratic governments of the past, seen as better economic planners than the markets. But if we analyse the dominant system more carefully, we will see that this narrative is just a cover-up, masking an equally authoritarian and centralized model of decision-making, with transnational financial and economic institutions dictating the political direction of entire societies.

The results of the hegemony of the economic over the political are absorbed by society. The most common way of life, as we can observe in every contemporary capitalist state, is based on mindless consumption and alienation of labour-time from so-called leisure time. And resistance towards the dominant order, since it emerges from the midst of this culture, remains entrapped in this economically-centered way of thinking. For a long time the alternatives proposed by activists worldwide have been limited to economic demands and models.

The Effects of Economism on Nature

In accordance with the worldview of economism, nowadays nature is viewed as a mere tool for serving economic growth. Forests are being rapidly chopped down, water basins depleted, animal species and natural resources such as oil are disappearing at a scary speed. Everything is being commodified, and the question is not ‘if’ the natural world will be devoured by this process but ‘when’ and ‘how’.

That’s why it’s important for the commons to be incorporated into a wider and holistic project of direct democracy, which will be able to challenge the domination of the capitalist market, as well as that of the state, in all spheres of life.

The commons, as opposed to the imaginary of economism, goes well beyond deterministic logic. It does not strive at predicting what should be done tomorrow in terms of a tight politico-economic program. This feature is also emphasized by the author Massimo de Angelis, who rejects the idea of determining *the* subject of change, regarding the future of the commons. That’s why the commons encompasses different communal and social forms, varying in certain aspects, but always sharing democratic and collaborative principles.

The commons can be viewed as a tool for experimenting in real time, rather than a strict economic model. Exactly because it does not rest on deterministic thinking, it experiments with different practices that share some desirable principles, trying to discover their pros and cons in order to develop them further or engage with new ones that appear in the process. The paradigm of the commons thus fits with the famous slogan of the Zapatistas: *Asking we walk*.

Conclusion

In contemporary mainstream economics, the economy is viewed as something separate from society, inspiring a science that calculates social dynamics and produces models that people should follow. This logic is fertile soil for the emergence of technocratic elites of experts, who (claim to) know what the economy is and how it operates. In this way the economy is given the power to direct the rest of society – whose members are seen as “unenlightened” and blind to its mysteries. Thus the dominant hierarchical organizational structure of contemporary society is not merely maintained, but deepened further.

Unlike the “ecological” approaches described above, the paradigm of the commons, in its relation to nature, challenges both the growth doctrine and hierarchical economic relations. Its target is not constant over-production and the stimulation of artificial needs in the name of profits for the few. On the contrary, it aims at sustainability and satisfaction of the needs of everyone involved through the mechanisms of common ownership and direct-democratic managerial procedures. The direct participation at its core (through ‘solidarity economy’ co-ops and other entities) ensures that the needs, created and satisfied by the participants are real individual and communal needs, and not artificially created by bureaucrats or capitalist mechanisms.

As a result of this, ‘commoners’ do not seek to exploit nature, but instead try to nurture it, since the people and their communities at the grassroots depend on resources such as their land, forests and fisheries. By rejecting the logic of domination of human over other humans, the commons sometimes consciously, sometimes not, also repudiates the domination of human over nature. This is evident from the adoption of ecological practices, such as permaculture, by many collectives and co-ops from commons-inspired networks.

The paradigm of the commons cuts across the ‘state-market’ pseudo dilemma, proposing instead direct management of land, resources and the means of production by involved individuals and their communities. This is evident from the writings of thinkers like Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, for whom governing principles for the management of the commons should be “equal access, reciprocity between what is given and what is taken, collective decision making, and power from the ground up.”⁵ The directly democratic procedures and the collective and communal forms of ownership they incorporate, exclude private owners, as well as the state apparatus. Society becomes fused together with land and nature.

⁵ Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, “Commons against and beyond capitalism”, *Upping the Ant* Vol. 15 (2013): p. 94

The very development of our societies is hostile towards nature. This means that the creation of more jobs, cars and technology, requires the over-exploitation of nature. And this world-view is shared by many on the Left, who are rooted in the same growth-based, anthropocentric logic.

At the heart of this world-view lies the logic of domination, hierarchy or ‘power-over’. As Murray Bookchin observed, the idea of human domination over nature is rooted in the human domination of other humans. In this way the principle of hierarchy can be found at the source of our present-day ecological crisis.

However, current approaches towards the preservation of nature do not achieve its preservation. Many people, completely in accordance with the dominant imaginary, view nature as a commodity. And so their demands focus on the preservation of certain natural areas, which then can be exploited for tourism. This so-called “green capitalism” includes some state involvement in the economy and environmentally “responsible” behaviour by capitalist firms, but it does not challenge economic hierarchies and the concept of constant growth.

State and Market

There are countless practices in all spheres of human life, including the economy, that successfully exist beyond statist bureaucracies and capitalist markets and are antagonistic to them. The contemporary ruling elites, however, have interest in the hegemony of the state and the market, for they do not challenge the dominance of the economy. Thus they are harnessing all their powers in the promotion of the market-state dichotomy as the only valid or realistic one. The mainstream narrative today has successfully been hijacked by this pseudo dilemma, which steers the dominant politics as well as supposed alternatives.

On the one hand, there is the capitalist model with its private sector, “free” market and constant economic growth. Nowadays this is the most powerful force, dictating politics and social relations. Capitalist development is one of the main sources of desperation and misery. Through the enclosure, by private owners, of common resources, many communities are left with nothing but their bare hands, to sell on the labour market. Even the societies in the so-called ‘First World’ are suffering from the effects of the capitalist system. Consumerist culture and the accompanying corporate hierarchy are stripping everyday life of meaning and dignity while economic growth, as the main engine of capitalism, destroys the environment, and makes it dangerous for human health.

The market-state pseudo dilemma suggests that the sole alternative to the market-based capitalism is state-based socialism. But a closer look at them both shows why they are, as the autonomists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest³ false alternatives. In its essence, the state is a hierarchical and bureaucratic mechanism that encloses common resources and then assigns functionaries to manage them, without permitting social participation. Thus it once again deprives society of direct interaction with its environment and elevates a tiny managerial elite, in practice the owner of the resources, to having the last word about how things should be done.

Economic Determinism

Determinism is one of the main pillars of economism. Our current capitalist system, as well as the totalitarian socialist one of the past, is built on it. Economic determinism is based on the idea that there exists a pseudo-science through which human potential and the direction humanity will take in the future, can be calculated and predicted, just like in mathematics. In a sense economic de-

³ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); p. ix

terminism is a kind of quackery, which creates a certain narrative, excluding some practices and logics, while presenting others as the only realistic and possible ones.

This is a precondition for the contemporary dominant market-state dichotomy. The “free” market and the state are configured in certain historical stages, which can vary according to different economic and deterministic theories, but are viewed as necessary conditions for the further advancement of humanity. They are regarded by experts, economists, and politicians as the only possible, real and “rational” systems. In this way, alternative organizational forms are excluded as “utopian – maybe desirable in a naïve way but completely impracticable and foolish. Castoriadis says that economic determinism destroys the possibility of thinking history could have taken other directions and rules out the emergence of the new.⁴

The Commons

The paradigm of the commons contains the potential for a radical break with economism. Although it ostensibly could be taken for just another economic model, it goes much further than that. By placing the political question of inclusive and participatory forms of decision-making at its core, the paradigm of the commons embeds itself into a wider project of direct democracy, encompassing all spheres of human life and nature. It cannot be viewed separately from wider social and environmental emancipation.

The practices of ‘commoning’ are deeply rooted in social deliberation and communitarian relationships. It is not solely concerned with narrow questions of production and consumption, and in fact imbues them with ethical and political characteristics.

⁴ Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* (Columbia University Press, 2014); p. 47