

Commoning and Factory Recuperation

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Contents

The limits of “workers control”	3
Commoning and recuperation	4
Ecological dimensions	4
Conclusion	5

The recuperation of factories does not in itself necessarily indicate steps towards liberation and deepening democratization. To avoid their incorporation into the statist economy or the capitalist market, the recuperated factories should be managed democratically by the communities in which they operate.

For many years now the factory was (and continues to be) among the symbols held most dear by revolutionaries from all kinds of radical political traditions. From the beginning of the industrial revolution up to our days, it occupies the imaginary of social movements worldwide. With crises caused by the instability of capitalism and the centralization of statism, workers sometimes resort to recuperation of their working place. This gives hope, but it also raises certain questions about the relation of factories to the broader society and even nature.

From recuperated factories in Latin America, like the legendary Zanon in Argentina, to European ones like the Greek Vio.Me., workers sometimes respond to the crisis by occupying this symbol of industrialism. These actions are praised by radicals and leftists, but will they contribute to the colourful puzzle of collaborative and direct-democratic entities that can lay the foundations of a non-statist, anti-capitalist future? Or are they destined to remain entrapped in the imaginary of economism?

The limits of “workers control”

If such endeavours remain limited to the notion of “workers control”, there is a danger that this will create a gap that only a state apparatus can fill. Often this indicates that the function of workers control would be to prevent the capitalists from organizing to sabotage production, to allow workers to get control over their profits and over the disposition of the product, and to set up a “school” of management for other workers. However such factories remain isolated entities, playing the role of romantic symbols of bygone workerism that needs to be incorporated externally into some larger entity. As history has shown, this task is being undertaken by vanguardist units, like parties, using such recuperations for the purpose of nationalization, thus strengthening “top-down” statism.

An example of this is the Russian revolution and the role of the Bolshevik party. The Bolsheviks, for whom the rebellious population was not ready for life in a stateless society, welcomed the workers control in the economic sphere in order to later incorporate it into the “all-seeing” state apparatus they built. The workers self-management on factory floor was later made an essential part of the Yugoslavian state. A more recent case is Venezuela under Chavez, where many workers resorted to taking control over their factories, just to demand later that they be nationalized, as they were unable to deal with the economic difficulties on their own.

Thus the control of the workers over their working place, although essential, does not in itself necessarily indicate steps towards liberation and deepening democratization. That’s why demands and support for workers control over factories can be found even among professional politicians and conventional left-wing parties. This does not mean that we should revoke any support for such endeavours, but we should remember that they are not enough in themselves.

Commoning and recuperation

What can fill the void created by the workers control over the factories, is the paradigm of the commons. It suggests that resources of wide social significance can and should be managed by those affected by and in need of them. Often this implies broad social participation.

Factories on their part, are designed to be highly productive units. Their production reaches large numbers of households and their functioning often causes serious imprint on the natural environment. Thus the operation of factories can be considered as of common interest for the wider community, rather than that of the workers or the capitalists claiming ownership over them.

In this line of thought factories should be managed by the wider social community, whose needs they potentially can satisfy. In this way their incorporation into statist economy or capitalist market could be avoided. This implies that the factories should be operated much like “consumer cooperatives,” in which consumers participate in the management of certain enterprises. This does not mean that workers will not organize the working process themselves on the factory floor, but that concerned consumers will be able to have a say and influence matters that concern them.

In practice this implies the creation of two sets of assemblies: of workers’ and of consumers’ assemblies. The workers’ assemblies (one or more, depending on the size and number of operational departments of each and every factory) should be responsible for the direct management of the factory. All staff involved in the production process should have the right to participate equally and directly in the decision-making process concerning their enterprise. This assembly’s decisions will have to carry most weight, when deciding on the factory’s production, since its members’ very livelihood depends on it.

The second assembly type – the consumers one – will involve people from communities that are using the factory’s products. Their number should vary according to the population being served. The consumers’ assemblies will have mainly consultative character regarding the quality of the production and the quantities needed by each community. In this way industrial units will be producing to satisfy real human needs, publicly deliberated, rather than commercially imposed. However, consumers’ assemblies should have certain “veto” rights over practices that could impact the natural environment and thus the health of nearby communities.

Ecological dimensions

The idea of human domination over nature has resulted in the economistic mindset of separation of man’s activity from nature’s well-being. Thus for many years the pollution of nature was overlooked in the name of unlimited economic growth, while communal environmental concerns were cast as symptoms of “backwardness”, “ignorance” and even “selfishness”. But our time is proving economism wrong. While contemporary capitalistic economies are constantly growing, human misery and inequality are proportionately rising, and the degradation of nature is threatening the very future of humanity.

The concern for nature should be incorporated in industrial production as well as in economic activity in general, which is responsible for a great deal of the ongoing pollution. By making production units producing for the satisfaction of actual human needs, many of them will no

longer be needed. There is no need of a factory for every neighbourhood or even city, at least not in a non-capitalist setting. When producing for profit in an artificially commercial manner, a significant part of the production gets dumped away, because it can't be sold and generate profits, thus being rendered "useless".

By maintaining the amount of factories necessary for the satisfaction of real social needs, rather than using them for expanding the reach of capitalist economics, the paradigm of the commons could intertwine factory recuperation with degrowth. This implies that the factories located in close distance from each other, can coordinate with one another and with the wider local society in redirecting production, for duplication and competition to be avoided. In other words, factories can change what they are producing, if other entities are already producing the same products and are managing to cover the local social demand for it.

Conclusion

In an age of uncertainty and deepening multi-layer crisis, it is surely exciting when people resist oppression by not just destroying, but by creating. Especially when they take over such industrial entities like the factory that has enormous productive capacities. But unlike deterministic approaches which view factory recuperation in itself as progressive and revolutionary, we can see that this is simply not the case. It could also help enforce consumerism, bureaucracy and "workerism" that could take regressive directions.

For the latter scenarios to be avoided, a serious rethinking is needed, that will reconfigure the relations between work and leisure, production and consumption, and ultimately between economics and politics. Thus a seemingly unbridgeable gap could be covered, giving new dimensions to the contemporary struggles against injustice and exploitation.

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