

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFRONTATION OR CONSTRUCTIVE TENSION

THE STATE AND THE COMMONS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
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‘Tipping Points’ was the title of the Institute for Political Ecology’s 2016 Green Academy, which brought together academics, politicians, activists and experts from a range of fields to discuss the commons, degrowth and climate justice and examine how these intersect. During the event, several speakers came together to discuss the commons as a reflection of the politics of the day and as a response to the failure of the state and the market, as well as its potential to harness real power and drive political change.

VEDRAN HORVAT: What exactly do we mean when we talk about the commons and the state today?

MICHEL BAUWENS: In European history, I would say that there are two competing visions of the state. One is a state-centric society as what existed in Eastern Europe, where the state is the primary driver of everything. The other model, which became dominant, is the market state that creates the conditions for the neoliberal market and the private sector to thrive. And I think we can oppose to these two options a state which is at the service of the commons, where the commons are the means of value creation for citizens. It would be a civic-centric state, a facilitating state, an enabling state, an empowering state; one that is actually at the service of the citizens, and sees itself that way.

JOHN CLARKE: The question about the state and the commons begs another: is it possible to rescue the beautiful vision of the state as the collective interest, the common good, and the public interest? That has always been a very powerful set of images about what the state is. The lived experience of states is more nuanced and more perturbing than

that, because states are also disciplinary, containing, shaping, and making sure that people behave properly. And citizens' relationship to the state is therefore about that strained tension between what they desire and the grim reality. The commons re-emerges today bearing the question: could we rescue that image, that fantasy of doing things together well, and is the commons a means to do so?

DANIJELA DOLENEC: The way I see the relationship between the commons and the state is what contemporary social movements and struggles make of this relationship, how they use it, and what its political potential is. I see at least two important elements: one is about ownership regimes, because at a very basic level, the commons discourse and imaginary help resist commodification and privatisation carried out by the neo-liberal state today. But more importantly than that, as we know from commons theory, it's not so much about who owns what, but about governance regimes, so it's essential to claim decision rights and move towards participatory and more inclusive governance regimes.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: I think the key feature of the present political situation is the development of movements often associated with new political parties, or, in the case of Britain for example, within and without the traditional Labour party. These movements are not just about protest and demonstrations,

they reflect the alienation of citizens from the political process, including parties and the state. They reflect a process that's gone on since 1968, which is citizens asserting themselves as knowledgeable, productive actors. The logic of alternatives created in the here and now and the refusal of existing relations, based on the presumption that things could be different, is continuing today through the environmental movement, energy cooperatives, community gardens, alternative care systems, and so on. What the commons captures is that notion of self-organisation and the creation of a material force, autonomous from the existing political sphere. And this is where the participation element comes in, based on the notion of people as knowing citizens. Citizens are alienated from the way the state treats them, as mere cogs; a statistic.

TOMISLAV TOMAŠEVIĆ: I think the commons are important as a new narrative that goes beyond the dualism between state and market as the only institutions for collective action and shared prosperity. Both are in crisis and see their legitimacy increasingly eroded today. Commons come in as a new narrative, showing us that it is possible to have collective action which is not based on market exchange, nor on a disciplinary, hierarchical, paternalistic approach implemented by the state. Outside the sphere of the state, the commons provide an autonomous counter power, which gives way to a sort of re-discovery of collective

practices of managing the resources. Commons are kind of re-discovering the co-governance – or self-governance – potential of the people, and this hopefully could also be extended towards the state, through types of co-management practices between the people no longer acting as customers or subjects of the welfare state, but more as co-producers or partners.

VEDRAN HORVAT: Can the state and commons work together? Can the commons have a transformative role for the state as a governance regime?

TOMISLAV TOMAŠEVIĆ: Conceptually, it's easy to put things in categories and say that there are three completely separated domains, which are the commons, the state, and the market. The reality is obviously much more blurred. The relationship between the state and the commons will depend on who holds state power. If the configuration of political power is favourable, the state can be used to protect and support the commons through the means of redistribution. The commons cannot work if cooperation with the state is not one between equal participants i.e. a fair relationship, and redistribution in return is what enables the commons as practice. And I think that where commons can be applied practically, this can lead to some kind of transformation of the state and its practices.

MICHEL BAUWENS: For me, the commons are a response to market and state failure; to a systemic crisis in which the extractive nature of the current economic system is endangering the planet. It is actually a new value regime and it is not the first time this has happened. For example, Europe between the 5th and the 10th century was a plunder economy; it was roving tribes trying to conquer territory from others, and then in the 11th century, we see the emergence of free cities, guilds, and commons as a new value regime. And so I think this is what's happening now. And this value regime needs a set of services and enabling mechanisms that only an institution like the state can provide, so for me it's not just about making the state better, but more like a conquest of a new value regime and the social forces that represent it. So it's a struggle for a vision of the state and I think that's the kind of moment that we are in.

DANIJELA DOLENEC: There is a specific tension between the commons and the state. Often in discussions around the commons comes this idea that it is a third domain, outside the state and market. But that's a very non-conflictual, Tocquevillian, conception – as if the commons would grow and capitalism would wither away. But that's not the way it goes, because in societies there are conflicts over how things should work and there are different interests. So I

would say that I see the commons as politically useful when confronting the state, when it's making claims as to how it should be reformed; rather than just thinking about separate autonomous zones which will grow out of themselves and become more powerful than the state.

VEDRAN HORVAT: Danijela, do you think that confrontations surrounding the commons are already present and challenging the state?

DANIJELA DOLENEC: Yes, absolutely. I would definitely interpret at least some of the contemporary social movements as struggles for the commons. Even if they are sometimes using the old vocabulary of the 'public', they are politically articulating another model than that of state versus market society.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: I think it's really important to see the commons as a different kind of power to the power of the state. The traditional power of the state is the power of domination. Then there's the power of transformative capacity, which stresses the autonomy and the creativity of popular forces. But it's a potential, not yet a reality. In a way, the role of the left and organisations like the Institute for Political Ecology (Croatia) is to nurture that potential and to build capacity. I think that alternative parties and movements will never win just through electoral politics, nor through insurrection. There has to be a link with an emerging, alternative paradigm, something akin to Michel's new regime of value.

DANIJELA DOLENEC: I think the theory of the commons importantly brings, to the Left, a focus on sustainability. During this Green Academy, we discussed the Left in Bolivia, a classical redistributive Left with its successes but also its failures, given its base within a productivist, extractivist paradigm. Politically advocating the commons produces a dual imperative – to abandon productivism and to have a broadly egalitarian, not just redistributive, approach.

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VEDRAN HORVAT: Globalisation is seen by many as serving neoliberal economic expansion, and Europe is seen to be an actor in that process. Can the commons help bring about change or an alternative to this within the institutions and Member States of Europe?

JOHN CLARKE: I think we live in a moment of profound failure. And one critical dimension is state failure in relation to serving both the planet and its people. And it's both a moment of opportunity for the commons and a moment of great danger. States are endlessly searching for innovation and better, cheaper, and faster ways of doing things that states are supposed to do and fail to do. So a whole range of things called public services are now open, not just to commercial exploitation but also to community interest and organisation. All those state failures constitute a growing moment of desperation but also potentially a moment of possibility in which the state might become a resource condition for generating more new things.

MICHEL BAUWENS: Gramsci said that crisis exists precisely in the moment in which the old are dying and the new cannot be born, and that it is in this interregnum that a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. I think if you look at the growth of the radical Right today, we are in exactly the same kind of period as the 1930s. If you go back to the 16th century, there was a period where the nation state

wasn't quite there yet. You had the Hanseatic League, the free cities in Northern Italy, so basically a period where there wasn't a dominant form yet. And I think we are in a similar period today, and we have to look at the seed forms, without really knowing which of these seed forms might become the answer.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: If you look at things emerging on the ground, I think a very effective transnational struggle has been the one against water privatisation in Europe. Key to that has been the notion that there is an alternative way of managing water that overcomes corruption, inefficiency, bad quality, etc. To think that, even whilst remaining public, the management of water would be improved through democratisation has been crucial in developing a very confident and democratic transnational movement. This even led to change at the European level; a constitutional change to build water as a common good, which is not insignificant.

DANIJELA DOLENEC: The political decay that we are living in and the rise of the far-Right is just another way of saying something about the failure of the Left. I think the commons discourse can help advance a politics of the Left for the 21st century. In my work, I've used Foucault's concept of a 'socialist governmentality' to shift focus onto figuring out a new state rationality and the purpose of a collective project, but also as way of govern-

ing principles that this would be based on. Material sustainability and a broader conception of egalitarianism sounds nice and easy, but doing it, and transforming it into a governmentality principle, is the imperative of the Left.

VEDRAN HORVAT: Is there a political momentum today for the commons in Europe? Where do the commons get the most of their leverage and what is their relation to power?

MICHEL BAUWENS: I think the city level is where the commons are most embedded at the moment. If you look at the experience of Barcelona, at Seoul in Korea, at Frome in the UK or at Grenoble in France, at the Co-Bologna experiment in Italy (as well as Co-Mantova, Co-Palermo, Co-Bataglia) – these represent a poly-centric governance model where policy-making is actually done at the grassroots level. It empowers citizens' groups to make policy proposals. I think this is very radical, even though it's also very pragmatic. Policy-making is opened up to citizen collectives, while the city becomes an enabling mechanism to realise these projects. Cities cooperate in new ways through a new translocal

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urban level that didn't exist before. So, for example, 40 cities worldwide have coalesced to regulate Uber and I think it would be worthwhile to actually start mapping these

initiatives. The same with fighting climate change and the coalitions of cities going much further than the state level. Another level is what I call 'neo-tribes' – mostly knowledge-workers travelling around the world, working from different places, and creating this whole infrastructure of global cooperation in

physical places, like co-working and fabbing¹. So, give that another 10-15 years and we'll have different types of transnational structures, like guilds of the Middle Ages. There are a lot of forces on the ground doing urban gardening, using fab-labs for co-working, alternative currencies, community support of agriculture... These people *are there*, but I don't think they are sufficiently mobilised for political projects.

TOMISLAV TOMAŠEVIĆ: A lot of cooperation and participation is happening at the local level because the nation-state is not equipped to support that kind of governance regime by

¹ Defined by Kraftner.com as 'crossing the boundaries between the digital and the physical world by using various tools of computer controlled fabrication like 3D-printers, lasercutters, CNC-machines and the like.'

the people. And the European supranational level is even more bereft of capacity to act and is less accountable, given its mass and tyranny of experts. But, personally, I don't see any other way but trying to change these governance regimes, especially the state. Without that political struggle to change state practices, I don't think we can bring commons and new alternatives to the fore.

DANIJELA DOLENEC: Contemporary social movements are relying, in part, on the discourse of the commons, but are struggling to articulate this as a political platform. For example, the Greek case of Syriza was focused on the state, while the Spanish example is more bottom-up. Syriza's attempt was an obvious failure while in Spain it seems to be more polycentric and more decentralised, and therefore opening up more possibilities. In addition to that, the failure of the Left towards its social base, namely the working class, but also now towards the middle class, raises the question of youth and whom they support. I think city politics – the city being symbolic of the over-commodification and the privatisation of public space – has a lot of potential because the city is also a space where the alternatives are quite visible and open to participation. Politically and concretely in terms of action and programme, I think the city as a space is a good first step, rather than immediately focusing on the state.

JOHN CLARKE: I think we need a discussion about power. The idea of “taking power” is an old Leninist inheritance. The idea that power is concentrated in one place, and that after seizing power we will run things, is almost funny. It's actually worth thinking about the way power is simultaneously constituted, concentrated, and distributed. And one of the most important things about the commons, and related movements, is that they leverage distributed power. They might not move to the centre of the state and dismantle it and reorganise it, but they certainly reconfigure its distribution, within and across particular places. The commons *per se* is not about seizing power, but it provides a language and it's meant to cover a hybrid sort of reality, pointing to a new material base for transformative politics, just as the union cooperative structures were the material base of the old Left parties and gave them both longevity and a source of material power. We're not trying to fetishise the commons, but there are people undoubtedly creating new collaborative, mutually beneficial forms, and these new parties have got to break with the old and presumptuous institutions to create the space for the commons. It's about changing the mentality, so that the commons can be understood as a creative and material force – which is a necessary condition for any political change.



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