

The Commons, the Public and the Left

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The issue of property is given great importance by the left, which approaches it essentially with the classical concepts of nationalisation, socialisation, public ownership and private property. The central point of contention is how much nationalisation. Some conceptual and political initiatives on economic democracy and worker-owned enterprises try to avoid authoritarian state traditions, and as a counter-concept to the neo-liberal policy of privatisation, the “public” has been brought into the debate. However, a left **discourse of the commons**, aimed at political intervention, hardly exists in the Federal Republic of Germany.

In parts of the Green Party, on the other hand, this debate is picking up speed, and here it connects to a tradition that reaches from the autonomy movement of the 1960s in Italy through the environmental movement since the 1970s and the globalisation-critical movement of the 1990s to the anti-neoliberal movement in the last decade with its struggles against privatisation and commodification. In contrast to the left, this tradition clearly works on the transformative potential and perspectives of the commons initiative and its promise to go beyond or even against “market and state”. The commons is taken here as a strategic transformative concept.

The commons contemplates a culture and economy of *communi-care*, of “*doing together*”, “*sharing*”, “*communicating with each other*”, “*participating*” and also of “*caring about what is in common*” or “*the general*” (common). It stands for the multi-faceted aspects of another economy and culture than the political economy of the private. As *commoners*, citizens are active. They transform themselves into commoners when they make into common cultural symbols and take into their symbolic or real possession something that previously was “private” or “only” public property. As we see in many places in the world, there is a demand to recover the commons that had been lost through privatisation and commodification (*reclaim the commons*), and new common property (including a *global commons*) has also been created, these goods then obtain the social quality of common goods. This character of being a common good does not result from the material sensuous nature of a thing – it is produced in the process of social appropriation.

Through the alteration of the relations of ownership, through practices of use, and therefore of the relations of real appropriation, the quality of relations of property can be changed. Typical aspects of private relations of property, such as restriction of access and exclusion and monopolisation of decisions, are not unaffected by this; they can be pushed back, devalued and largely be annulled. A movement politics of appropriation definitely has possibilities of shaking deeply engrained and powerful relations of property.

From the left point of view, the understanding of the commons that prevails in the green milieu has fundamental weaknesses:

- The commoners, who, in a communal and self-organised way according to rules they determine, take care of common natural, social or cultural resources, are understood as *communities* acting in a communitarian way – what inequities, class natures, relations of domination arise, exist and are reproduced in such communities are hardly contemplated.
- The prevalent high esteem in which the “community” is held within the discourse on the commons, to the detriment of the individual, of individuality, of singularity, etc. ignores the by now centuries old problem of the anchoring of this community discourse in pre-political, romantic and then raw and violent bourgeois nation-state and corporatist-identity discourses and practices, which are anything but progressive or left – instead of consistently re-articulating them from the point of view of a politics of democracy and difference.

Positioning the commons, in the liberal understanding, as the realisation of an autonomous, civil-society concept “beyond market and state” and then seeing in this merely the sustainable business model of a

Green capitalism, gives up any attempt to foreground the potential of commoning to resist rationalities of profit and domination and working out its political economy as its own mode of production, one that is non-capitalist and anti-domination. The debates around the commons, and efforts to develop these debates, would then be attempts to open up experiments and paths to non-capitalist modes of production.

Commons and public

In contrast to this, the left reinforces the “public”. The public appears as the adequate description of very diverse situations: public goods, public basic services, public property, public employment, public sector or public service, public power, public interest, public spaces, public life or participation of the public in decisions. The concept, with its variety of utilisations, tries to project a clearly visible difference in respect to the neoliberal cult of the “private”. In its history, the “public” has evoked and transmitted, to the present day, *four major significations*: It has in mind the *non-secret*, the accessible and transparent; it claims an orientation to the *common good* (the general interest); it stands for *stateness* and, in the last analysis, as public it means *media* – public opinion mediated by the media. In distinction to the private it signifies a context (a relation) between protagonists, which, beyond private and individual, takes account of the *other*, and finally of the *general*. It is a space for discussion and action, in which society always inserts itself as such: as a context in which not only private interests, but also those of others are pursued, and thus a societal common or general entity is generated and made accessible through participation. How these social and political qualities of the public are formed depends on the societal struggles and constellation of forces and on the projects, strategies and politics/policies put into play.

A progressive, left project of the public would have to mean and aim at the *democratisation* of power, the promotion of political, economic, as well as social *equality*, a prioritisation of a *common-good orientation* and the opening of paths to *individuality* through the right to participation in the elementary conditions of life. To advocate the “public” means to shape property and social relations, enterprises, goods, spaces or instruments for basic care provision, of communication, public power or political decisions in such a way that, through their orientations to the general interest (orientation to the common good) the inequitable distribution of resources in society and likewise the inequitable distribution of political goods (participation, access) are attenuated, access to them systematically opened and their arrangement democratised and thus also generalised. In the confrontation with the neoliberal politics of the private, the political left has in the meanwhile developed initiatives of an alternative politics of the public in the most diverse areas and in some cases tied them to ideas of a transformation of the actually existing public. However, the key element of a transformation strategy of the public – a left concept of the state – is missing. And there is no bridge to a new dynamics of a politics of the commons.

The state, however, can not only contribute to the destruction of the commons, but also to securing it; it can function as a trustee, as an arbiter, *co-governor*, and also as a promoter of the commons. In doing so, how the state should be changed is an issue. How can the commons assert itself in a world of large-scale industrial capitalist production, highly socialised mega-conglomerates and large-scale technologies of global scope? That is, how can the commons generalise itself beyond the communities? A progressive politics of the public could be an answer, which conceptualises the commons also on the basis of the public and helps consolidate the parallel goals of both politics into a new politics of transformation, and, in so doing, change both political cultures. For the left, a politics of the public and a politics of the commons must go together.