No Such Thing as Big Society

The commons, commonplaces, commonalism

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An important strand of thought that derives from autonomous Marxism is what Rudi Laermans recently proposed to call 'commonalism' (Laermans in: De Cauter 2011, 240-49). Laermans wants to lead anticapitalist discourse away from the 'political heroism' that seeks to abolish the state towards a commonalist governmentality that seeks to recapture it. Laermans is right, we are indeed beyond the need for heroes. But since Holland is a country where the old deliberative mechanisms of corporative democracy are fast losing ground to neoliberal tendencies, we do need to arm ourselves against this onslaught. Actual violence is not the issue here, but means to counter the violence of state and market are. If commonalism is to become a viable political program, it needs to distinguish itself not only from the neoliberal agenda, but also from the weak left that has let itself be drawn into bureaucratic sectorialisation without belief in the active force of the population it decides for. Because at a moment of big cuts in public spending that are following the privatization of healthcare, energy, transport, communication and housing, David Cameron's 'Big Society' seems to hold a particular sway over many Dutch politicians and civil servants in strategic positions. If anything has aroused a massive

interest, it is this program, which on a surface level shows allegiance with the commons in much the same way as the autonomous tendency does.

A Tale of Four Conferences

Five days ago a conference on the global commons was held at the University of Utrecht. With regards to our own conference of the past three days, I couldn't help but be drawn to George Caffentzis' 'A Tale of Two Conferences. Globalization, the Crisis of Neoliberalism and Questions of the Commons' (2004) to make a small comparison. Caffentzis identifies a 'Neo-Hardinian' tendency that mainly concerns itself with the global commons as a management issue. The question is under what conditions forests, fishing grounds, foraging areas, clean air etc. *can* be managed as a commons. Drawing on the work on the commons of Elinor Ostrom, the joint winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics, they work with a set of endogenous variables to see if a commons may hold. They do not make a distinction between commodity-producing commons and subsistence-producing commons, and hardly consider outside forces that may act for or against the commons. Thus, most of the researchers and planners who are part of this tendency are firmly opposed to neo-liberalism, but not to 'markets' in general. In their pragmatism they simply look how best to manage a resource, and leave more general economic measures to others. This invites the danger that certain policy-led instigations or protections of a commons are upheld solely because they form a much gentler way of coercing a community towards capitalism than the IMF Strucural Adjustment Programs have proven to be.

"Thus at the moment when the NAFTA ad WTO agreements were being finalized in the mid-1990s, with their neoliberal prejudices in favor of private alienable property in land, the 'there is no alternative' World Bank was carefully exploring 'Plan B', i.e. a political position to fall back on when the antagonistic response to

the privatization of land becomes too powerful and aggressive. A key element in this alternative is the acceptance of the land or forest commons at least as a stop gap" (Caffentzis 2004, 9).

Seven years after Caffentzis presents his text in Mexico, Western Europe has also finally realised that neoliberal finance is dead. Dead, but ruling still. At the Utrecht conference on the commons last Monday, a good deal of the speakers was sure of that too. The focus lay on subsistence-producing commons and the consensus was that state nor market can solve the economic, social and ecological crises all on earth are facing. Consequentially, many shared a sense of dread about Big Society. Granted, most were also afraid of the word 'capitalism', but there seems to be an opening for discussing the market now that didn't exist in 2004. Maybe 'Plan B' has been left off for too long and researchers and planners react against that, or maybe people see that even 'Plan B' will not cut it. The instigation of commons, also urban commons in so-called developed countries, is back on the agenda.

Lean, corporate government

Hence Cameron's harking back to a concept that England knows all about. While the Dutch version of the commons is only remembered for the street names it has inspired, 'commons' and 'enclosures' have been part of English history, language and political and juridical discourse at least since the 1500s. Here's how the ResPublica thinktank that is responsible for the Big Society programme introduce their ideas to 'capitalize the poor':

"An asset is … a source of potential future income. … All communities own a range of assets, including the time, knowledge and future potential of those who live in them. However, on this definition, the only genuine asset held by Britain's burgeoning welfare class is the welfare promise. … [This] promise is an asset without any of the long-term benefits of wealth, without the

empowerment, the psychological wellbeing, the optimism or the social status that all stem from genuine ownership. … The state ... must find a way of re-endowing communities with independence and self-sufficiency" (Wyler and Blond 2010, 3).

The unemployed are portrayed as the 'welfare class', passively sucking up government money. But that will change under Cameron, because "people, including those on low incomes, should be able to acquire a direct financial stake in local assets in their communities" (Idem, 9). If this is the basis for a new élan in England, then Cameron has learned from David Harvey's reply to Hernando de Soto. While Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' created a rent and price structure "that precludes lower-income and even middle-class people from access to accommodation anywhere near the urban [London] centre" (Harvey 2008, 36) in the 1980s because, just as in the privatized favelas in Rio, "the poor, beset with income insecurity and frequent financial difficulties, [were] easily persuaded to trade in [their new-found] asset for a relatively low cash payment" (Ibidem). With a 'Community Right to Buy', this option is foreclosed.
What does Big Society have to do with the commons? Well, in the eyes of its authors it is supposed to be a direct inheritor of a long history of attempting "to achieve asset ownership in poor communities". Big Society comes follows in line of the "revolts against land enclosure from the 15th century onwards; 17th century experiments by the Levellers and the Diggers; late 18th century radicalism; the first co-operative communities … in the 19th century; … [and the] experiments in community enterprise in South Wales and elsewhere during the 1930s Depression" (Wyler and Blond 2010, 8). With one Big Difference: none of these have had to buy their property at just a little under the current market value from the State that built it with public money.
Coupled with the massive budget-cuts and immense lay-offs in the British public sector, a Trust created under the 'Community Right to Buy' might create a situation where a greater level of subsistence is achieved. Community-owned food production, education,

healthcare, all this is possible. What's more, this has been going on in Britain for more than 25 years already. But the angle of this newfangled Thatcherism lies in the fact that this is also possible *without buying the* 'assets'. Ownership is no longer a necessary condition for generating social production. Why else was the corporate world so excited by the possibilities of outsourcing in the late 1990s and early 2000s? The old commons weren't weighed down with mortgages. So why the sudden interest in communal ownership? Big Society represents the situation in which the State is trying to externalise the costs of managing the 'Public Interest' to its communities, much like corporations are externalising the costs of the social and environmental havoc they wreck. The New Common in the form of a community Trust will provide a higher degree of subsistence, and even if it is creating commodities for exogenous markets, the thing it produces what nobody talks about, is debt. Thus, the Big Society program creates exactly what Caffentzis fears: a type of commons that is compatible with capitalism. The corporative democracy is turning into a corporate democracy where the citizens, never the inhabitants or even all workers, are allowed the vote next to market parties. It is a perfect example of the evolution of what Foucault calls governmentality, the science of government to steer the desire of the population in ways that increase its production capacities (Foucault 2007, …). These days it seems that not the state but the market itself has become the prime employer of this biopower. Meanwhile, the common good is still left to individual initiative, be it of a private person, a community or a company.

Possibilities for the common

Then again, having a base in a commons from which to create other common projects is always a good thing. Therefore, if the option seems economically viable in the long run, there is no reason not to go ahead with a community bought and maintained project. But as a government initiative clearly the wish is to alleviate government

debt, cut public spending and create immediate solvency by transferring the debt to communities. Not helping the poor. In fact, it will push many poor people even more towards workfare schemes or other holding pens. Used like this, these New Commons really are mean.

That is why there is cause for alarm when Dutch civil servants and politicians are looking towards Cameron for help. In The Netherlands, a neo-Thatcherite wave is passing through the public housing sector. Here, an unimaginative Right to Buy programme is just getting hold, aimed principally at members of the creative class – which in planners' jargon includes planners, high-level managers and high-level employees, thus showing Florida's intentions for the middle class politics they really are. In order to remain economically healthy, one former cowboy head of a housing corporation has determined that at least half of the public housing stock should be sold. Wise ideas that could only have been thought up on the height of the real estate bubble.

In fact, there is no such need for the public housing companies. This scheme is thought up from the perspective of a competitive market, while Holland still has housing corporations that, although privatized in 1998, function relatively well in comparison with Britain. Also, whereas British national and local government is all too happy to create 'active' community members out of a supposedly 'passive' public, in Holland the regulation is so well defined that something like a community Trust could never get a foothold. Worse, even if one would be able to establish itself, it would never be community-led. Dutch bureaucrats have too great a belief in the need for management.

And that is where the common as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use it comes in from the Dutch perspective. Rudi Laermans says that a radical Left should reclaim the public government rather then destroy all governance structures, and so it should. But reclaiming them from the perspective of the common is still a radical political program. The commons once were a spatially and socially determined means of subsistence, which would broadly be Marx'

perspective (Marx 2010, 683). Common grounds for the Neo-Hardinians nowadays are spatially and legally defined spaces for harvesting resources, hunting and fishing (Van der Schans 2001, 393). It is the scarcity of the resources in these commons that calls for their regulation. The autonomous Marxist definition of 'the common' on the other hand, is a situation of plenty, of abundance. Scarcity is created in order to create economical profit, and every time an aspect of the common gets enclosed, the neoliberal market has increased itself at the cost of the common. Here we can see that in autonomous thought, the common is not an economic dimension where scarcity rules, but a social phenomenon made up of relations of different intensities (Hardt and Negri 2000, 28). It is a socio-ontological concept, meaning that it underlies our everyday perception of reality. But while it can be perceived, it is difficult to act upon in an organised way. This is mainly because up until now, our political and economical structures have been erected against the idea of plenty. They are set up to cope with lack and allow for the funnelling away of harvested resources and capital. They are geared towards monopolization instead of sharing and quantify the sort of variables that allow for more extraction of financial value, thus favouring financial plenty over the increase of social, mental and physical value – over ways of enabling more use of the common for everybody. If used in the wrong way, the commons in the sense of Ostrom and the neo-Hardinians can be used up. The autonomist common cannot be used up. In fact, it grows in strength the more people make use of and contribute to it. But parts of it can be closed off, and every time that happens the social resilience of a community or society gets weakened. Options to contribute to the common get taken away and the model of scarcity reinserts itself as the norm.

The socio-ontological concept of the common can therefore found a political understanding of the common as well. This is the basic premise of commonalism. Just like the multitude, also the common is a concept with a socio-ontological aspect and a political aspect (Hardt and Negri 2009, viii). Socio-ontologically speaking it has

similar characteristics to commonplaces and other biolinguistic forms (Virno 2004, 35-37) that Paolo Virno rightly points out cannot be privately owned. The common is the net result of all human and natural activity, it is social production first, and through the creation of artificial scarcity a resource for economic production second. It is what we already share, and what we might come to share if we act on what we always have shared and always will. If the social common is to be politicized, we will have to learn how to create local commons that can overcome the increasing threat of privatization and of the financialization of life, because it works with an economy of subsistence instead of consumption. Instead of the normal cycle where a social relationship that is still in common – free for all who partake – is turned into a market, ways need to be found to turn markets into commons, and to keep on expanding the sphere of the common, as Nick Dyer-Whiteford proposes with great verve (Dyer-Whiteford …).

The Dutch commons

At first face, Ostrom's understanding of the commons and the autonomous understanding of the common are at odds with each other: scarce resources in need of endogenous management versus abundant social relationships access to which needs to be increased. However, the commons constitute mainly a question of governance whereas the common constitute one of ontology. At a time in which it is clear that capitalism, once having trumped politics, is now being trumped by the planetary ecology, it is also clear that another kind of economy will have to be adopted. And if Giorgio Agamben's fearful visions are not to be made into more of a reality than they already are (Agamben 1993; Loic Wacquant …), an ecological economy has to be an economy that is based on social justice and economic democracy. A better understanding of the commons and of the common is necessary. Their differences, their relations, and their aims need to be explored and enacted as widely as possible. It is my own aim to do this, but for the last part of this

paper I restrict myself to their strictly theoretical application in Dutch. Because these concepts, used almost exclusively in English in Dutch academic circles, will remain academic if they don't get translated into Dutch. Also, such a translation might provide new applications and specific pathways for a commonalist governmentality that opposes the market-led destruction of the planet. It provides a direct link between the common and the multitude, and it also joins up Foucault's concept governmentality.

In a country where the word capitalism is still shunned – because this does not only hold for most academics – all this can be awakened by pushing the right linguistic buttons. Right now, the Dutch version of the commons, 'meent', is retained only as a name for certain places. In a country exemplary for its history of cooperation almost no one still knows what the word means, let alone the concept. An excavation of the 'meent' can function as a means of awakening ideas of ownership and use that are buried deep in our political history, but have been eclipsed by the market orientated approach that also started along the Rhine on the basis of this strong spirit of cooperation.

Etymologically the word 'meent' shares its root with 'menigte', which is the Dutch translation of the Latin 'multitudo' (Philippa et al. 2005, 179-81 and 2007, 323-24). They share a Middle Dutch adjective, 'maneg' meaning 'many' (Philippa et al. 2007, 334). Because this was the same in Old English and Old Frisian, the 'meent' and the 'menigte' even have the same root as the English words 'mean' and 'common' – through the Latin contraction of 'cum' (with) and 'munus' (office, tribute, gift) into 'communis'.

The Middle Dutch 'meente' was in turn derived from the adjective 'gemeen' which actually has the same sense as the English 'mean' – joint, common, public, general, universal, shared by all, possessed jointly, and low-quality, inferior, poor. The prefix 'ge-' in this case goes back along the lines of 'same' and 'together'. The affix '-te' in both 'meent' and the only word that derives from it that is still in use, 'gemeente' (municipality), functions to create nouns out of adjectives (Philippa et al. 2009, 353). In Middle Dutch then, the

municipality wasn't principally an administration, but a community with a certain amount of land. Public property wasn't an issue. Ownership was a mix of private and common property.
To reinvigorate the autonomous tendency's use of the common, Sjoerd van Tuinen and me have proposed the term 'het gemene' (Griffioen and Van Tuinen 2010). And in my opinion, the ontological *and ecological* state of abundance that the concept of the common points to always needs to be activated and kept going through any number of use systems. Because this socio-ontological pole of the concept needs to be actively brought into play – because its political pole is not conceived of in terms of emergence but in terms of organisation that deals with the creation of more social relationships out of a situation of abundance – the common needs to be fed into different new commons that will produce more commons, not captured into markets that decrease it. 'Het gemene' needs to be played out in new 'meentes'. And the object of new meentes should exactly be to use the ontological common to create new 'meentes'. Therefore, the meaning of the concept 'meent' shouldn't be confined to its old meaning of self-managed systems of scarcity (land, forest and water use), but should be used also for the self-management and self-creation of intellectual, affective and social domains. It points the way to a governmentality of biopolitics instead of biopower.

Conclusion

The common is buried deep in the Dutch language (meent), but when dug up it presents us with an immediate connection to the multitude (menigte), thus creating a discourse that is no longer academic but understandable for everybody. The only word from this root that is still in wide use is 'gemeente' or 'municipality'. Thus in Dutch the concept of the common is directly linked with governance and governmentality, rather than simply with property or even ownership.

However we phrase it, the proposal stays the same. Commonality provides no shortcut to a better politics. It isn't a guarantee for a happier life: the common can be mean. This is because on a deeper level we can discern another ambivalence in the common. We already know that it is both a socio-ontological and a political concept. But what needs to be emphasized is that as a political concept, it needs to be chosen. If that does not happen, the ontological state of the common is turned against itself. This is true all the more at a time when the State has resigned itself to the corporate management of the public good and corporations have claimed the right to take care of the private good. The political claim to the common as developed by and out of Italian autonomous Marxism seeks to capture capital and turn it over into social production, reversing the way capital gain is made over the social production of the multitude. It means trying to cut off as many possibilities to privately gain from common efforts and is a way of fighting the 'immaterial civil war' that stems from the 'dark side of the multitude'. Looking for the common is fighting against economic and social deprivation. The radical calls for going 'beyond the state' that are also a post-autonomous heritage need not be avoided, but need to be valued for what they are: a rally against Big Government that first decided that there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women and their families, and now calls upon Big Society to alleviate its debt. No such thing must come to pass. Neo-liberal government needs to be recaptured and turned into common government. "*We are not commodities in the hands of bankers and politicians*".