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OMNIA SUNT COMMUNIA

1. *The Commune Is Coming Back.* 2. *Inhabiting as a Revolutionary.* 3. *Defeating the Economy.* 4. *Taking Part in a Shared Power.*

1. An Egyptian writer, a dyed-in-the-wool liberal, wrote in the now-distant days of the first Tahrir square: "The people I saw on Tahrir Square were new Egyptians, having nothing in common with the Egyptians I was used to dealing with every day. It was as if the revolution had created Egyptians in a higher form [...], as if the revolution had not only rid Egyptians of their fear but also cured them of their social defects. [...] Tahrir Square became like the Paris Commune. The authority of the regime collapsed and the authority of the people took its place. Committees were formed everywhere, committees to clean the square and committees to set up lavatories and washrooms. Volunteer

doctors set up a field hospital." In Oakland, the Occupy movement held Oscar Grant Plaza as the "Oakland Commune." In Istanbul, no better name could be found, already in the first days, than the "Taksim Commune" for what was coming into existence there. A way of saying that revolution was not something that Taksim might lead to one day, but its existence in actuality, its ebullient immanence, here and now. In September, 2012, a poor Nile Delta village, Tahsin, 3,000 inhabitants, declared its independence from the Egyptian state. "We will no longer pay taxes. We will no longer pay for schools. We'll operate our own schools. We'll collect our garbage and maintain our roads ourselves. And if an employee of the state sets foot in the village for any other purpose than to help us, we'll throw him out," they said. In the high mountains of Oaxaca, at the beginning of the 1980s, Indians trying to formulate what was distinctive about their form of life arrived at the notion of "communality." For these Indians, living communally is both what sums up their traditional basis and what they oppose to capitalism, with an "ethical reconstruction of the peoples" in view. In recent years, we've even seen the PKK convert to the libertarian communalism of Murray Bookchin, and project themselves into a federation of communes instead of the construction of a Kurdish state.

Not only is the commune not dead, it is coming back. And it's not returning by chance. It's returning at the very moment the state and the bourgeoisie are fading as historical forces. Now, it was precisely the emergence of the state and the bourgeoisie that put an end to the movement of communalist revolt that shook France from the 11th to the 13th century. The commune, then, is not the chartered town, it's not a collectivity endowed with institutions of self-government. While it can happen that the commune is recognized by this or that authority, generally after battles are fought, it doesn't need that in order to exist. It doesn't always even have a charter, and when there is one, it is quite rare for the latter to stipulate any political or administrative structure. It can have a mayor, or not. What constitutes the commune is the mutual oath sworn by the inhabitants of a city, a town, or a rural area *to stand together as a body*. In the chaos of 11th century France, the commune involved pledging assistance to one another, committing to look out for each other and defend each other against any oppressor. It was literally a *conjuratio*, and such conjurations would have remained an honorable thing if royal jurists had not set about in the following centuries linking them to the idea of conspiracy as a way of getting rid of them. A forgotten historian puts it in a nutshell: "Without association through oath,

there would have been no commune, and that association was sufficient for there to be a commune. Commune had exactly the same meaning as common oath." So a commune was a pact to face the world together. It meant relying on one's own shared powers as the source of one's freedom. What was aimed for in this case was not an entity; *it was a qualitative bond, and a way of being in the world.* A pact, then, that couldn't help but implode with the bourgeoisie's monopolization of all the offices and all the wealth, and with the deployment of state hegemony. It was this long-lost, originary, medieval meaning of commune that was somehow rediscovered by the federalist faction of the Paris Commune in 1871. And it's this same meaning that reemerges periodically since that time, from the movement of soviet communes—which was the forgotten spearhead of the Bolshevik revolution till the Stalinist bureaucracy decided to liquidate it—to Huey P. Newton's "revolutionary intercommunalism" by way of the Kwangju Commune of 1980 in South Korea. Declaring the Commune is always to knock historical time off its hinges, to punch a hole in the hopeless continuum of submissions, the senseless succession of days, the dreary struggle of each one to go on living. Declaring the Commune is agreeing to *bond with others*, where nothing will be like it was before.

2. Gustav Landauer wrote: "In the communal life of men there is only one structure appropriate to the space: the commune and the confederation of communes. The borders of the commune make good sense (which naturally excludes disproportion, but not unreason or awkwardness in isolated cases): they delimit a place that ends where it ends." That a political reality can be essentially spatial presents something of a challenge to the modern understanding. First, because we've been accustomed to think of politics as that abstract dimension where positions and discourses are distributed, from left to right. Second, because we inherit from modernity a conception of space as an empty, uniform, and measurable expanse where objects, creatures, or landscapes occupy their place. But the sensible world does not present itself to us in that way. Space is not neutral. Things and beings don't occupy a geometric position, but affect it and are affected by it. Places are irreducibly loaded—with stories, impressions, emotions. A commune engages the world from its own place. Neither an administrative entity nor a simple geometric unit of space, it expresses rather a certain degree of shared experience inscribed territorially. In this way, it adds a depth to the territory which no survey agency can ever represent on any of its maps. By its very existence, it disrupts the reasoned gridding of space, it condemns any vague attempt at "territorial planning" to failure.

The territory of the commune is physical because it is existential. Whereas the forces of occupation conceive of space as a continuous network of *clusters* to which different *branding* operations lend the appearance of diversity, the commune regards itself first of all as a concrete, situated rupture with the overall order of the world. The commune inhabits its territory—that is, it shapes it just as much as the territory offers it a dwelling place and a shelter. It forms the necessary ties there, it thrives on its memory, it finds a meaning, a language, in the land. In Mexico, an Indian anthropologist, one of those defending the "communality" as the guiding principle of their politics, says in reference to the Ayuujk communes: "The community is described as something physical, with the words 'najx' and 'kajp' ('najx,' the land, and 'kajp,' the people). 'Najx,' the land, makes possible the existence of 'kajp,' the people, but the people, 'kajp,' give meaning to the land, 'najx.'" An intensely inhabited territory ends up becoming an affirmation in itself, an articulation, an expression of the life that's lived there. This is seen just as clearly in a Bororo village whose layout makes manifest the inhabitants' relationship with their gods as in the blossoming of tags after a riot, a plaza occupation, any of those occasions when the plebs start inhabiting the urban space again.

The territory is that by which the commune materializes, finds its voice, comes into presence. "The territory is our living space, the stars we see at night, the heat and the cold, the water, the sand, the gravel bars, the forest, our way of being, of working, our music, *our way of talking*." This is a Nahua Indian speaking, one of the *comuneros* who took back—by force of arms, at the end of this century's first decade—the communal lands of Ostula seized by a gang of small landowners of Michoacán. The Nahua went on to declare the autonomous Commune of San Diego de Xayakalan, there on those lands. It seems that every existence with some slight purchase on the world needs a land base for its orientation, whether it's in Seine-Saint-Denis or the Aboriginal lands of Australia. To inhabit is to write each other, to tell one's stories, from a grounded place. This is something we can still hear in the word geography. The territory is to the commune what the word is to the meaning—that is, never just a means. This is what makes the commune and the infinite space of commodity organization the categorical opposites that they are. The territory of the commune is the clay tablet that reveals its meaning as nothing else does, and not a mere expanse endowed with productive functions skillfully distributed by a handful of planning experts. There is as much difference between an inhabited place and a zone

of activities as there is between a personal journal and an agenda. Two uses of the land, two uses of ink and paper, with no other resemblance between them.

As a decision to confront the world together, every commune places the world at its center. When a theoretician of communality writes that it "is inherent in the existence and the spirituality of indigenous peoples, characterized by reciprocity, collectivity, kinship ties, primordial loyalties, solidarity, mutual aid, *tequio*, assembly, consensus, communication, horizontality, self-sufficiency, territorial defense, autonomy, and respect for mother earth," he neglects to say that it's the confrontation with our epoch that has required this theorization. The need to autonomize from infrastructures of power is not due to an ageless aspiration to autarky, but has to do with the political freedom that is won in that way. The commune is not preoccupied with its self-definition: what it means to show by materializing is not its identity, not the idea it has of itself, but the idea it has of life. Moreover, the commune can only grow from its outside, as an organism that only lives by internalizing what surrounds it. Precisely because it wants to grow, the commune can only take sustenance from what is not it. As soon as it cuts itself off from the outside, it weakens, devours itself, tears itself apart, loses it vitality, or surrenders to what the Greeks call, with their entire country in

mind, "social cannibalism," for the very reason that they feel isolated from the rest of the world. For the commune, there is no difference between gaining in power and concerning itself essentially with what is not it. Historically, the communes of 1871, that of Paris, but also those of Limoges, Périgueux, Lyon, Marseille, Grenoble, Le Creusot, Saint-Étienne, Rouen, as well as the medieval communes, were doomed by their isolation. And just as it was easy, with calm restored in the provinces, for Thiers to come and crush the Parisian proletariat in 1871, in a similar way the main strategy of the Turkish police during the Taksim occupation was to prevent the demonstrations originating in the restive neighborhoods of Gazi and Beşiktaş, or the Anatolian neighborhoods on the other side of the Bosphorus, from rallying to the Taksim cause, and Taksim from forming the link between them. So the paradox facing the commune is the following: it must at the same time succeed in giving some consistency to a territorial reality at odds with the "general order," and it must give rise to, establish links between, local consistencies—that is, it must detach itself from the groundedness that constitutes it. If one of the two objectives is not met, either the commune that's stuck in its own territory becomes gradually isolated and neutralized, or it becomes an itinerant troop, away from home ground, unfamiliar with the situations it passes

through, and only inspiring distrust along its way. This is what happened to the detachments of the Long March of 1934. Two thirds of the fighters met their deaths on the journey.

3. That the core of the commune is precisely what eludes it, what traverses it yet always remains beyond its appropriation, was already what characterized the *res communes* in Roman law. The "common things" were the ocean, the atmosphere, the temples, that which could not be appropriated as such. One could take possession of a few liters of water, or a strip of shore, or some temple stones, but not the sea as such, and not a sacred place. The *res communes* are paradoxically what resists reification, their transformation into *res*, into *things*. It's the designation in public law of what falls outside of public law: what's in common use is irreducible to juridical categories. Language is typically "the common": while one can express oneself *thanks to* it, by *means of* it, it is also something which no one can possess as his own. One can only make *use* of it.

In recent years some economists have tried to develop a new theory of the "commons." The "commons" are said to be the set of those things to which the market has a very hard time assigning a value, but without which it would not function: the environment, mental and physical health, the oceans, education, culture, the Great Lakes, etc.,

but also the great infrastructures (highways, the Internet, telephone or sanitation networks, etc.). According to those economists, who are both worried about the state of the planet and desirous of improving the operation of the market, there needs to be invented a new form of "governance" for these commons that wouldn't depend on the market alone. *Governing the Commons* is the title of the recent bestseller by Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, who has defined eight principles for "managing the commons." Understanding there is a place for them in an "administration of the commons" that remains to be invented, Negri and associates have embraced this theory, which is perfectly liberal at its core. They've even extended the notion of commons to include everything produced by capitalism, reasoning that all of it results in the last analysis from the productive collaboration between humans, who would only need to appropriate it through an uncommon "democracy of the commons." The eternal militants, always short of ideas, have rushed into step behind them. They now find themselves claiming "health, housing, migration, social care, education, working conditions in the textile industry, etc." as so many "commons" that must be appropriated. If they continue down this path, it won't be long before they demand worker management of nuclear power plants and the same for the NSA, since the

Internet should belong to everyone. For their part, more sophisticated theoreticians are inclined to make the "commons" into the latest metaphysical principle to come out of the West's magical hat. An *arche*, they say, in the sense of that which "organizes, commands, and rules all political activity," a new "beginning" that will give birth to new institutions and a new world government. What is ominous about all this is the evident inability to imagine any other form of revolution than the existing world flanked by an administration of men and things inspired by the ravings of Proudhon and the lackluster fantasies of the Second International. Contemporary communes don't claim any access to, or aspire to the management of any "commons." They immediately organize a shared form of life—that is, they develop a *common relationship* with what cannot be appropriated, beginning with the world.

If ever these "commons" were to pass into the hands of a new breed of bureaucrats, nothing about what is killing us would substantially change. The entire *social* life of the metropolises works like a gigantic demoralization enterprise. Everyone within it, in every aspect of their existence, is *held captive* by the general organization of the commodity system. One can very well be activist in one organization or another, go out with one's group of "buddies," but ultimately it's everybody for themselves, each in his own skin, and there's no reason to

think it might be different. Every movement, however, every genuine encounter, every episode of revolt, every strike, every occupation, is a breach opened up in the false self-evidence of *that life*, attesting that a *shared* life is possible, desirable, potentially rich and joyful. It sometimes seems that everything is conspiring to prevent us from believing this, to obliterate every trace of other forms of life—of those that died out and those about to be eradicated. The desperate ones at the helm of the ship are most afraid of having passengers less nihilistic than they are. And indeed, the entire organization of this world, that is, of our strict dependence on it, is a daily denial of every other possible form of life.

As the social varnish cracks and peels, the urgency of forming into a force is spreading, under the surface but noticeably. Since the end of the movement of the squares, we have seen networks of mutual support cropping up in many cities to stop evictions, of strike committees and neighborhood assemblies, but also cooperatives, for everything and in every sense. Production co-ops, consumer co-ops, housing, education, and credit co-ops, and even "integral co-ops" that would deal with every aspect of life. With this proliferation, a welter of previously marginal practices is spreading far beyond the radical ghetto that had more or less reserved them for itself. In this way they're acquiring a seriousness and effectiveness that wasn't there

before, and they themselves are easier to deal with. Not everyone is alike. People are facing the need for money together, they're organizing to have some or do without. And yet, a cooperative wood shop or auto repair shop will be just as irksome as a paying job if they're taken as the aim instead of the means that people have in common. Every economic entity is headed for oblivion, is oblivion *already*, if the commune doesn't negates its claim to completeness. So the commune is what brings all the economic communities into communication with each other, what runs through and overflows them; it is the link that thwarts their self-centering tendency. The ethical fabric of the Barcelona workers' movement at the beginning of the 20th century can serve as a guide for the experiments that are underway. What gave it its revolutionary character was not its libertarian schools or its small operators who printed contraband money stamped CNT-FAI, or its sectoral trade unions, or its workers' co-ops, or its groups of *pistoleros*. It was the *bond* connecting all this, the life flourishing *between* all these activities and entities, and not assignable to any of them. This was its unassailable base. It's noteworthy, moreover, that at the time of the insurrection of July 1936 the only ones capable of tying together all the components of the anarchist movement offensively was the group Nosotros: a marginal bunch whom the movement had suspected

up to that point of "anarcho-Bolshevism," and who a month earlier had undergone a public trial and a quasi-exclusion on the part of the FAI.

In several European countries hit by "crisis," we're seeing an emphatic return of the social and solidarity-based economy, and of the cooperativist and mutualist ideologies that accompany it. The idea is spreading that this might constitute an "alternative to capitalism." We see it rather as an alternative to struggle, an alternative *to the commune*. To convince oneself of this, one only has to look at how the social and solidarity economy was utilized by the World Bank, particularly in South America, as a technique of political pacification over the last twenty years. It's well known that the noble project of helping the "Third World" countries to develop was conceived in the 1960s in the notably counter-insurrectionary mind of Robert McNamara, the US Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968, the McNamara of Vietnam, Agent Orange, and Rolling Thunder. The essence of this economic project is not in any way economic: it's purely political, and its principle is simple. To guarantee the "security" of the United States, that is, to defeat communist insurrections, one has to deprive them of their main cause: excessive poverty. No poverty, no insurrection. Pure Galula. "The security of the Republic," wrote McNamara in 1968, "doesn't depend exclusively, or even primarily, on its military might, but

also on the creation of stable economic and political systems, as much here at home as in the developing countries all over the world." From such a viewpoint, the fight against poverty has several things going for it: first, it makes it possible to hide the fact that the real problem is not poverty, but wealth—the fact that a few hold, together with their power, most of the means of production; further, it turns the problem into a question of social engineering and not a political issue. Those who make fun of the near-systematic failure of the World Bank's interventions to reduce poverty, from 1970 on, would do well to note that for the most part they were clear successes *in terms of their true goal*: preventing insurrection. This excellent run was to last until 1994.

1994 was when the National Program of Solidarity (PRONOSOL) was launched in Mexico with the support of 170,000 local "solidarity committees" designed to soften the effects of brutal social destructuring that would logically be produced by the free-trade agreements with the United States. It led to the Zapatista insurrection. Since then, the World Bank is all about microcredit, "reinforcing the autonomy and *empowerment* of poor people" (World Development Report of 2001), cooperatives, mutual societies—in short: the social and solidarity economy. "Promote the mobilization of poor people into local organizations so they can act as a check on the state institutions,

participate in the process of local decision-making, and thus collaborate to ensure the primacy of law in everyday life," says the same report. Meaning: co-opt the local leaders into our networks, neutralize the oppositional groups, enhance the value of "human capital," bring into commodity circuits, even marginal ones, everything that escaped them previously. The integration of tens of thousands of cooperatives, even rehabilitated factories, into the program Argentina Trabaja, is the counter-insurrectionary masterwork of Cristina Kirchner, her calibrated response to the uprising of 2001. Not to be outdone, Brazil has its own National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy, which in 2005 already counted 15,000 businesses and is a fine addition to the success story of local capitalism. The "mobilization of civil society" and the development of a "different economy" are not an adjusted response to the "shock strategy," as Naomi Klein naively thinks, but the other stroke of its mechanism. The enterprise-form, the alpha and omega of neoliberalism, spreads along with the cooperatives. One should not be overly pleased, as some Greek leftists are, that the number of self-managed co-ops has exploded in their country these last two years. Because the World Bank keeps exactly the same tallies, and with the same satisfaction. The existence of a responsive marginal economic sector of the social and solidarity type doesn't pose any threat

to the concentration of political, hence economic, power. It even protects it from every challenge. Behind such a defensive buffer, the Greek shipowners, the army, and the country's large corporations can go on with their business as usual. A bit of nationalism, a touch of social and solidarity economy, and the insurrection will have to wait.

Before economics could claim the title of "the science of behaviours," or even the status of "applied psychology," the economic creature, the being of need, had to be made to proliferate on the surface of the Earth. This being of need, this needy toiler, is not a creation of nature. For a long time, there were only ways of living, and not needs. One inhabited a certain portion of this world and one knew how to feed oneself, clothe oneself, entertain oneself, and put a roof over one's head there. Needs were historically produced, by tearing men and women away from their world. Whether this took took the form of raids, expropriation, enclosures, or colonization matters little in this context. Needs were what economy gave to man in return for the world it took away. We start from that premise, there's no use denying it. But if the commune involves taking responsibility for needs, this is not out of a concern for autarky, but because economic dependence on this world is a political as much as existential cause of continual abasement. The commune addresses needs with a view to annihilating the being of need

within us. Where a lack is felt, its elementary gesture is to find the means to make it disappear as often as it may present itself. There are those "in need of a house"? One doesn't just build one for them; one sets up a workshop where anyone can quickly build a house for themselves. A place is needed for meeting, hanging-out, or partying? One is occupied or built and also made available to those who "don't belong to the commune." The question, as you can see, is not that of abundance, but of the disappearance of need, that is, participation in a collective power that can dispel the feeling of confronting the world alone. The intoxication of the movement is not enough for this; a profusion of *means* is required. So a distinction must be made between the recent restarting of the Vio.Me factory in Thessaloniki by its workers and a number of variously disastrous Argentine attempts at self-management which Vio.Me takes inspiration from nonetheless. What is different is that the resumption of factory production was conceived from the beginning as a political offensive supported by all the remaining elements of the Greek "movement," and not merely as an attempt at alternative economy. Using the same machines, this factory producing tile-joint compounds was converted to the production of disinfectant gels that were supplied in particular to dispensaries operated by the "movement." It's the echo made here *between* several facets of the "movement," which has a

communelike character. If the commune "produces," this can only be in an incidental way; if it satisfies our "needs," this is something extra as it were, in addition to its desire for a shared life; and not by taking productions and needs as the object. It's in the open offensive against this world that the commune will find the allies that its growth demands. The growth of communes is the real crisis of economy, and is the only serious degrowth.

4. A commune can be formed in any situation, around any "problem." The workers of the AMO factories, pioneers of Bolshevik communalism, opened the first communal house of the USSR because after years of civil war and revolution, they were sorely lacking in places to go for vacation. A communard wrote this, in 1930: "And when the long rains of autumn began to beat down on the roof of the collective dacha, under that roof a firm decision was made: we would continue our experiment during the winter." If there's no privileged starting point for the birth of a commune, it's because there's no privileged point of entry into the epoch. Every situation, if it's engaged with in a focused way, brings us back to this world and links us to it, to its unbearable aspects as well as the cracks and openings it presents. In each detail of existence, the entire form of life is at stake. Because the object of every commune is the world, basically,

the commune must be careful not to let itself be completely determined by the task, the question, or the situation that led to its formation and were only the *occasion* of the convergence. Thus, in a commune's unfolding, a good threshold is crossed when the desire to be together and the power that comes from that outstrip the initial reasons for its formation.

If in the course of the recent uprisings there was one thing conveyed by the streets, beyond the dissemination of riot techniques and the now-universal use of gas masks—that symbol of an epoch that's become unbreathable—it was the initiation into joy that's equivalent to a whole political education. Over these last few years, there was no one, not even the shaved-neck assholes of Versailles, who didn't develop a taste for the wild demonstration and the ruckus with the cops. Each time, the situations of urgency, riot, occupation gave rise to more than was committed to them initially in terms of demands, strategy, or hope. Those who went to Taksim to prevent six hundred trees from being ripped out soon found something else to defend: the square itself, as a matrix and expression of a power regained at last, after ten years of political castration and preventive dismemberment of every semblance of collective organization.

What partakes of the commune in the occupation of Tahrir Square, the Puerta del Sol, or some American occupations, or in the forty unforgettable

days of the Free Republic of Maddalena in the Susa Valley, is discovering that one can organize in so many domains that they can't be totalized. This is what exhilarated us: the feeling of taking part in, of experiencing, a shared power, one that was unassignable and fleetingly invulnerable. Invulnerable because the joy that haloed each moment, each gesture, each encounter, could *never* be taken away from us. Who's cooking meals for a thousand persons? Who's doing the radio? Who's writing the communiqués? Who's catapulting rocks at the cops? Who's building a house? Who's cutting wood? Who's speaking in the assembly? We don't know, and don't give a fuck: all of that is a *force with no name*, as a Spanish Bloom said, borrowing the notion without knowing it from the 14th century heretics of the Free Spirit. Only the fact of sensing that what one is doing, what one is living through, participates in a spirit, a force, a richness shared in common will enable us to be done with economy, that is, with calculation, measurement, with evaluation, with all that petty accountant's mentality which is everywhere the mark of resentment, in love as well as in the workshops. A friend who had been camping for a long spell on Syntagma Square did a double take when he was asked how the Greeks would have been able to organize their food supply if the movement had burned down the Parliament and brought down the country's economy

in a definitive way: "Ten million persons have never let themselves die of hunger. Even if that might have caused a few skirmishes here and there, the disorder would have been tiny compared to the disorder that's ordinarily the case."

What characterizes the *situation* that a commune faces is that by giving oneself to it unreservedly, one always finds more in it than one brought to it or sought from it: one is surprised to find one's own strength in it, a stamina and an inventiveness that is new, plus the happiness that comes from strategically inhabiting a situation of exception on a daily basis. In this sense, *the commune is the organization of fertility*. It always gives rise to more than it lays claim to. This is what makes *irreversible* the unheaval that affected the crowds that descended on all the squares and avenues of Istanbul. Crowds forced for weeks to deal on their own with the crucial questions of provisioning, construction, care and treatment, burial, or armament not only learned to organize themselves, but learned something that most didn't know: that we *can* organize ourselves, and that this capacity is fundamentally joyful. The fact that this fertility of the street was not mentioned by any of the democratic commentators is a rather clear indication of its dangerous potential. The memory of those days and nights makes the orderly everydayness of the metropolis appear even more intolerable, and exposes its pointlessness.