The commons, the state and transformative politics

Hilary Wainwright examines how new technology and new forms of organisation are coming together to transform the left and labour movements, political representation and democracy.

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The resistance to the G8 in Rostok in June this year had a particularly varied and energetic character. A massive international demonstration converging from all quarters of the town. Camps, communal kitchens and alternative forums. Clowns and samba bands. Confrontations with the police. A disciplined and imaginative non-violent disruption of the summit, which even the Financial Times judged to have been successful.

Among those taking part were a group of around thirty activist intellectuals from Europe, Latin America and North America who met Berlin in the spacious rooms of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation near some well-graffiti'd stumps of the Wall. It was the fourth seminar of the 'Networked Politics' series, an international inquiry into 'rethinking political organisation in an era of movements and networks'.

We had come together and formulated our common search mainly through the European and World Social Forums. A distinctive focus has been the influences of developments in information technology on different levels of transformative politics, practical and conceptual. In some ways these developments deepen the pre-web ways in which many of us were both rethinking political organisation (inspired by the non-hierarchical, networked practices of the women's movement) and reformulating common ownership (inspired by the creative trade unionism of groups like the shop stewards at Lucas Aerospace with their 'alternative plan for socially useful production'). At the same time, the impact of information technology is stimulating entirely new trains of thought.

The discussions in Berlin included an exploration of the implications of internet technology for the three major issues of our inquiry: the commons and the public; labour and social movements; political representation and democracy.

The commons and the public

Arturo di Corinto, a sharp and ebullient Italian media activist, writer and film-maker, set out a bold vision of free software as a common resource: 'Thanks to its characteristics, the free software is a distributed property that is capable of evolving into a common good', he declared.

The characteristics of free software, he went on to argue, give it the character of a virtual commons: freely accessible, non-exclusive, something which everyone can make use of, even if they have not participated directly in its creation; bringing together producers and users; its quality is enhanced by its use; the community of open soft developers is based on certain rules of self-organisation, leading to the emergence of a complex system.

He was interrogated by Glenn Jenkins, a puckish character whose insights have been honed by prolonged struggle on a neglected estate on the periphery of Luton to turn disused land and buildings into commons, and in turn use them as a base from which to reassert common control over local services. Glenn's arguments and experiences raise questions of how the commons relates to the state, notably state services and resources. The Exodus Collective squatted empty buildings and eventually

won their demands for public money – unemployment and housing benefits – to go towards sustaining their co-operatively managed housing rather than into the pockets of private landlords. They went on to work with an alliance of community groups in setting up the Marsh Farm Community Trust to invest £50 million New Deal for Community money over ten years to regenerate an estate all but abandoned by government and local authority alike.

As he told his story, the question became: can state services ever be transformed into a commons? The idea of the commons refers to how shared resources are managed, implying open access, collaborate self-management by those who use a resource and those who provide it. A state service can be very inaccessible and its forms of management exceedingly distant and alienated from both users and providers. Many of those who first thought up the idea of the welfare state imagined they were creating common goods. But the framework of representative democracy has been too far removed from those who used and provided the services day to day. As Glenn and other residents of Marsh Farm found fifty years after their public estate was built, a state resource was not in reality a common resource; its 'public' facilities managed by the public officials in the name of the people but several steps removed from the actual community whose interests state resources should have served.

Can ideas, both inspirational metaphors and actual experiences, from the free software movement provide any guide for turning public services into commons? A teasing repartee developed between Arturo and Glenn. But behind it was a serious issue of what the points of convergence and connection there might be between the virtual commons and the material commons.

One connecting theme concerns the social and individual use and development of knowledge. And this is important for the question of state services becoming commons because the organisation of knowledge is fundamental to the possibilities of genuine democratic control. The virtual commons is based on the open, shared and collaborative – as well as individually creative – development of knowledge, valuing the knowledge of producer and user and working with processes by which they can interact. This could provide a basis for remaking the 'public' as a commons that promises a more sustainable alternative to the encroachments of the private than does any defence of the public in its original form.

Historically, the organisation of knowledge in 'public' spheres – public services, public administration, public industry – has been based on a hierarchical, bureaucratic and individualistic approach to knowledge, separating the producer or provider from the user, protecting rigid boundaries between different kinds of knowledge, working with a strongly proprietorial approach in terms of institutional ownership. (The predominant approach to knowledge of the private corporations which are increasingly taking over the public has loosened up internally, with more interactive, informal forms of management, more horizontal flows within the company but the imperatives of commerce and profit make them have secretive and exclusive about access to, the development of, knowledge). The notion of a public good that isn't in some sense a common good is becoming less and less sustainable.

Remaking public services

In the Northern hemisphere today there are not now many live sources of inspiration for a vision of the commons, for creative collaboration between users and producers underpinning a genuinely common ownership of the service or natural or built resource. (In the South, of course there is, in the indigenous approach to land and natural resources, and the deep and widespread legacy of those traditions evident in strong social movements like the landless workers' Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil which not only struggle for land reform but through occupations and co-operative agriculture create new economic commons.) In the North the virtual commons provides a powerful for rethinking the public (or conceptualising the rethinking that is in practice taking place) as the commons.

The idea of development through mutual use is especially suggestive. To apply this to public services like education, health and so on highlights the way that the effectiveness and innovative capacity of these knowledge-based services depends on a collaboration between users and producers/providers, thereby treating users and public sector workers (not just the managers or experts) as knowledgeable collaborators in a developmental process.

This points therefore to the need for new more directly participative and power-sharing forms of organisation through which such collaboration can be achieved. This assumes that the service user potentially has the creative capacity to recognise a problem and help in the process of identifying a solution through a collaborative process. (This is in stark contrast to the traditional idea of 'the delivery' of public services to a more or less passive public). Here, free and open software is not just an inspirational metaphor but also a material tool for facilitating this kind of collaboration between individual users and public sector workers, shifting the balance of power from centralised public service management towards the user and the skilled service provider. It is also a tool for shifting co-ordination between different parts of a public service, moving us from a hierarchical to a co-operative model. This in turn will allow for greater autonomy in the local provision of local services under active local control while at the same time collaborating and co-ordinating across a wider territory.

Both these new possibilities opened up by free software can only be realised here in the UK, if two elementary moves are made towards renewing public services as material commons. A first condition is that public service workers have the dignity, time, the training and the rights of co-management to be able to collaborate meaningfully with service users; the second is a remaking of local government, so that, having become little more than a plethora of partnerships dependent on national funding streams and on complying with nationally imposed targets, it is transformed into a democratically elected body with strategic powers and a budget of its own that can be the subject of participatory power-sharing with local citizens. The first condition involves a rethinking and reasserting of labour as social, co-operative process and itself potentially a commons. (In the present capitalist economy, including the state sector, it could be called a 'hidden commons' whereby the co-operative nature of labour is distorted by pressures to maximise profit – or in the state sector by the legacy of hierarchical, military forms of administration). The second requires reflection on the kind of political institutions and forms of democracy that create the conditions for democratic self-management and common access to public resources to flourish.

Rediscovering social creativity

Marco Berlinguer of Transform! Italia coordinates the Lavoro in Movimento project which links social movements and the different parts of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL). He argued forcefully that to recreate politics we need to rediscover labour. How far and in what way can labour help to give a radical and sustainable coherence to the diverse sources of resistance to globalisation?

An important response came from Carlo Formenti, a constantly inquiring person who once worked as a trade unionist in engineering in Northern Italy and is now a professor of new media theory in Lecce. He argued that modern-day capitalism is only capable of reproducing its rule by taking language, communications, emotions and feelings and 'putting them to work.' He gave the example of the web 'communities' like MySpace and YouTube that are initiated or taken over by corporations. People engage in these 'communities' innocently, playfully, with little sense of them as commercial activities. Yet, in reality this growing expression of sociality is being used to map and profile markets, turning these 'communities' into lucrative targeted marketed places – the very opposite of innocent social interaction. It's an example of the way that the commons we create freely in our daily sociality are invaded, 'enclosed' by the corporate, uncontrollable market. (I qualify the concept of 'the market' to be

clear about the problem: the threat to the commons is not ‘the market’ in some general and abstract sense but the oligopolistic, corporate-driven character of contemporary capitalism).

Formenti took me back to Marx’s original understanding of labour in terms of social creativity, the creative capacity of the human as a social being. This social nature of labour’s productivity leads to an understanding of labour as itself part of the commons. This in turn underpins the original arguments for common ownership of the means of production. But our discussion went beyond an account of the expropriation of this social creativity directly in production and considered many further ways in which capitalist production utilises and constricts social creativity in the process of ensuring capital accumulation and domination. What Formenti is pointing to is the distinct form of commercialisation, and consequent suppression of creative capacity, characteristic of contemporary capitalism. This wider understanding of labour, pointing beyond the direct capitalist-waged worker relation, surely provides a potential for rethinking the role of labour – social creativity – both in connecting different forms of resistance, and in long-term our vision of the democratic self-management of the commons.

This broader understanding of capitalist suppression of social creativity (which includes of course sociality, autonomy, reflexivity and all the elements and conditions for exercising such human potential) has always been an important theme in the women’s movement. As the Canadian writer and rabble rouser Judy Rebick pointed out, feminists have long argued that under capitalism, housework and care for children and partners became ‘domestic labour’, the reproduction of labour-power, carried out under an oppressive division of labour in which creative relations of love and solidarity are distorted by the constraining context and pressures of gender domination and wage-labour. An issue for detailed thinking about the organisation of the commons therefore concerns how to organise common facilities for childcare and other forms of domestic labour in ways that enable people’s personal relations, including with children, to flourish.

Similarly, the privatisation of public services has entailed the appropriation of labour though bureaucratisation and distortion by the wider pressures of the capitalist market. Public provision had important ethical foundations of creativity in the service of the public good. In some ways the strong persistence of a public service ethic is a continued but unrealised belief in common goods and the original idea among those providing these goods that such was the common purpose animating the welfare state.

The contradictions of contemporary capitalism

The ambivalent effect of web technology is that, on the one hand, it has been a pervasive means of commodifying people’s free relations, behind their backs as it were; but on the other hand there is a reverse process. Through a variety of methods (peer-to-peer downloading, websites sharing/exchanging labour or services in kind, the spreading, promoting and lubricating of the social economy), the web is also a massively powerful means of lessening dependence on the capitalist market, spreading on an unprecedented scale the idea and example of common goods and free knowledge and culture into spheres that were previously thoroughly commodified. The same technology that is facilitating relentless efforts to stimulate new markets and realise profits from the huge leaps in productivity, and with it huge leaps in stress and work intensification, is also enabling those who are victims of the stresses of intensified production to see and test for themselves the possibilities of breaking out of the economic relations that are producing rampant commercialism and overwork.

The full realisation of these possibilities will require all sorts of structural changes including, no doubt, a basic income for all – a condition perhaps for an economy of the commons? But the point here is that a new potential exists for connecting resistance and alternatives around issues of culture, consumption and daily life with organisation around the dignity and control of work. Where does this lead? We can’t

be sure, but it points at least to an underlying connection between struggles around varieties of labour to spreading or creating the conditions for autonomous social creativity – the emerging social economy, promoting free software and resisting the commercialisation of the web.

This emphasis on a shared but necessarily networked struggle for the conditions of social creativity also marks the break – which has been implicit since 1968 – from a traditional socialist focus on questions of structure to addressing questions of social interaction, the development of the individual personality, and sustainable relations with nature, all of which bring us back to the question of the commons. It seems to me that the revival of interest in the idea of the commons is actually about an urge to return to the original aspiration of socialism, with a new language and under new conditions – the new awareness of the social character of knowledge, the urgent sense of a common environment under threat, the de-socialisation of significant labour processes. But that original aspiration remains relevant: the common, associative management of the 'common treasury of the world', and the common ownership and control of the means and processes of production. As well as being a search for what this means in an age of globalisations, the revival of the idea of the commons is also a reaction against the ways in which, during the twentieth century especially, state and party institutions have mediated, appropriated and substituted themselves for the complexity and dynamism of these ideals, beyond all recognition.

Whether 'the commons' is counter-posed to the state or used as a language for transforming the state depends to a degree on different national experiences. Rather than thinking of the commons as a delimited sphere, between market and state, I would view it as a goal of transformation for the organisation of both all social resources, including labour, that can always be pre-figured in and against the actually existing institutions of market and state. This leads naturally to the issue of political representation, which of course needs space of its own and is only beginning to be explored in the context of the question of the commons.

Democracy beyond representation

Our discussions on political representation have been searching for a new model of engagement with the state. Our starting point has been the nature of the autonomy of social movements from political parties and institutions. Given the history of the ideal of the commons in the hands of the state, the question of autonomy, and then of what kind of relationship to build on the basis of autonomy, is central.

I want to suggest that the distinctive contribution of left political parties, or their representatives in political institutions, should be to open up the institutions, to redistribute power outside them so that it can be shared and support new institutions and new relationships of control over state power. Their distinctive position is thus one of straddling the political institutions on the one hand and the conflicts and emergent sources of power in society on the other. The aim must be to both open up and democratise the institutions and, as a necessary part of this process, to encourage and support emerging institutions based on deeper forms of democracy and the principles and practices of the commons. A classic example would be the power-sharing of participatory budgeting in municipalities in Brazil and now in parts of Europe, and its relation to the growing social economy in both continents. But there are many other examples.

What are the conditions and presuppositions of such an understanding of political representation? I will just mention one here: it concerns the emergence of non-state sources of democratic power. It's a concept that needs further debate on another occasion but the point is this: while radical mass movements have not been sustained 1970s-style or Seattle-style or anti-war-February-15th-style, but what is striking is a need to create lasting sources of sources of democratic power autonomous from the

state: democratic institutions that go beyond, but are often an outcome of, movements.

I'm thinking here in the UK of developments like London Citizens; or union branches like those fighting for alternatives to privatisation taking on a responsibility for the public interest that has been vacated by elected politicians; community organisations which similarly take on a public responsibility to propose solutions for estates and neighbourhoods abandoned by the political class; asylum seeker and refugee organisations that go well beyond campaigning to provide an infrastructure of support and defence; the global networks like 'Our World is Not for Sale' that provide a force for accountability on global institutions and corporation that have escaped the conventional mechanisms of parliamentary accountability. It's probably a world-wide phenomenon taking many different forms; certainly I've observed it in parts of Latin America and Europe and even in the UK. And this is what convinces me of its distinctive, emergent character – if something innovative happens across so many places, there must be something going on.

We are not talking here about relying only on direct democracy and popular power – these struggles need and want support from within the institutions, hence an opening and democratisation of existing political institutions. But we are talking about phenomena that are more than movements and ephemeral campaigns. They are trying to create different kinds of relationships here and now, based on principles of the commons, and at the same time building democratic power to challenge and transform institutions driven by private profit or bureaucratic self-interest. Any rethinking of public administrations, political economy or political organisation must make these actual experiments in co-operation and democratic power one of its starting points.