

Dall'otto al nove giugno si è tenuto a Barcellona un incontro organizzato da transform!europa sui beni comuni sociali, in attesa di pubblicare un articolo che riassume l'evento, anticipiamo il contributo di Birgit Daiber.

Conference on Social Commons, Barcelona June 2018

By Birgit Daiber

Dear Friends, after years of commoning in conferences, cooperation projects, networking, discussions on the diversity of experiences and designing strategies how broaden them – I think it's time to discuss how to implement them on a political level: Commons as one dimension of initiatives to reclaim a social, ecological and democratic Europe connected with the reconstruction and democratization of public services.

Different from some of the commons networks in Europe which try to stay outside direct political debates, claiming commons as a fundamental new way of economic and social practice that is not assignable to one or the other political direction, I think commons are potentially an essentially left issue. Why? Very simple: The question of property is basic for all left politics from its (organised) beginning in the 19th century – until today. In his theory of value, Karl Marx revealed the contradiction between exchange value and use value. And this too is still relevant today. Within these two dimensions of left thinking we find the global movements of the commons. Francois Houtart says in his basic manifesto from 2011 that commons initiatives focus on use value, democratic participation and autonomy, being part of a new post-capitalist paradigm and in a short note from 2014 he is pointing out: "Concretely, it means to transform the four "fundamentals" of any society: relations with nature; production of the material base of all life, physical, cultural, spiritual; collective social and political organization and culture. For the first one, the transformation means to pass from the exploitation of nature as a natural resource merchandize to the respect of nature as the source of life. For the second one: to privilege use value rather than exchange value, with all the consequences with regard to the concept of property. The third one implies the generalization of democratic practices in all social relations and all institutions and finally inter- culturality means to put an end to the hegemony of Western culture in the reading of the reality and the construction of social ethics. Elements of this new paradigm, post-capitalist, are already present all over the world, in many social movements and popular initiatives. Theoretical developments are also produced. So, it is not a "utopian vision" in the pejorative sense of the word. But a clear aim and definition is necessary to organize the convergences of action. It is a long-term process which will demand the adoption of transitions, facing the strength of an economic system ready to destroy the world before disappearing. It means also that the structural concept of class struggle is not antiquated (fiscal heavens and bank secrecy are some of its instruments). Social protests, resistances, building of new experiences are sources of real hope."

We are just in time, as left parties in Europe are preparing their national campaigns and their European performance for the next European elections in 2019. Election-campaigns always give the opportunity to discuss programmes and projects more intensely in public debates, and so the Common Good could become one of the core-issue for the Left. Practical initiatives and debates are already well developed on different levels in some countries – as e.g. Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy and France and Belgium and there are hundreds of examples of successful initiatives on municipal, national and international levels. Just to give some few examples:

The municipal level: most of commons initiatives are local activities, in cities as well as in rural areas. Urban Commons are prominent and well documented. Cities as Seoul (KOR), Barcelona (ES), Naples (IT), Ghent (BE) and Frome (GB) show how to realise urban commons and how municipalities can work together with commoners. There are legal competences too supporting commons initiatives. The Berlin Senate for example has the right to confiscate abandoned property (but they don't use it yet and there is no obligation for social use).

National level: The movement for Water as a commons in Italy initiated a referendum with the result that 51% of Italian citizens voted for it. The government must act and the Parliament has to discuss new laws – a still on-going struggle. The water-movement is putting the question of Commons in the context of re-thinking the role of the public in the management of goods and services related to the universal human rights.

The “old” left idea, that the State per se would guarantee public services, failed with processes of privatization – and even when the State is still holding the ownership, goods and services are often given to private companies. It is crucial to suspend market activities from public services to ensure that profits in this sector are re-invested for public use. At the same time, public services must be democratized and there has to be public control with the participation of workers and citizens (only?) to guarantee correct functioning of the common good.

On national levels, the laws on social and common use of property and the laws on cooperatives are decisive. An interesting example is the legal structure of SCOPs in France (“Société cooperative et participative” or “société coopérative ouvrière de production”). In 2016 there were 2680 SCOPs with 45 000 active members – and they are still on the rise.

International level: Bolivia and Ecuador included Commons explicitly in their constitutions. In 2010 the UN general assembly adopted the resolution on access to clean water as basic human right. The initiative for a fundamental declaration on the Common Good of Humanity goes beyond this – well aware that a proclamation has no legally binding character but can be an instrument for social and political mobilization, creating a new consciousness and

serving as a basis for the convergence of social and political movements at the international level. Clearly it is a long-term task, but it needs to be started. Not only can the coming together of social movements like the World Social Forum and political parties like the Forum of São Paulo contribute by promoting such a Declaration, but individual countries through their representatives in international organizations like Unesco and the United Nations can also push this agenda forward.

Coming to the European Level: Since some European Parliamentarians from different political groups founded an 'Intergroup' on Commons and Public Services in 2014, the 'European Commons Assembly' developed with participants from nearly all European countries. ECA initiated conferences and various activities and published a general call: "We call for the provision of resources and the necessary freedom to create, manage and sustain our commons. We call upon governments, local and national, as well as European Union institutions to facilitate the defence and growth of the commons, to eliminate barriers and enclosures, to open up doors for citizen participation and to prioritize the common good in all policies. This requires a shift from traditional structures of top-down governance towards a horizontal participatory process for community decision-making in the design and monitoring of all forms of commons. We call on commoners to support a European movement that will promote solidarity, collaboration, open knowledge and experience sharing as the forces to defend and strengthen the commons. Therefore, we call for and open the invitation to join an on-going participatory, inclusive process across Europe for the building and maintenance of a Commons Assembly. Together we can continue to build a vibrant web of caring, regenerative collective projects that reclaim the European Commons for people and our natural environment" (europeancommonsassembly.eu).

How could the common good be important for European politics? Just to remind one of the prominent battles of the Left (including Greens and Trade Unions) in the years 2000: the battle against the Bolkestein-Directive. In the end it was possible to introduce the protection of public services as "services of general social and economic interest (SSIG's) on European level. This could be a starting point for initiatives for commons to fight for the recognition of commons initiatives in different fields as basic citizens rights in Europe.

All these examples show at least the slightly fragmented situation. The political and legal conditions differ widely and there is a need to discuss demands on all levels – and there is the need to discuss them on the European level.

4. Opportunities for the European Left

The general interest of European Left is to re-think the role of public for goods and services with relation to universal rights and to prohibit market-logic in public services. The aim is to suspend the market from public goods and services and to democratize public services for

the recuperation of public services as Common Good. This is the first dimension. The second is to re-think social and workers rights as common goods. And the third is the recognition of citizens' initiatives as basic rights and the promotion of commons initiatives.

So, it's a three-fold battle and it could start from the general statement:

Commons are of general public interest, thus the general demand is the political and legal recognition of citizens' initiatives whose aim is to create, re-construct and recuperate resources, goods and services in a social, ecological and democratic way. But there are specific demands to add. As there are (just to give some examples):

1. Cooperative use of abandoned land and houses. Social use of confiscated property
2. Right for workers to recuperate their companies and manage them collectively – before selling them to investors or going bankrupt
3. Open access for all citizens to information services that are democratically organised, and free public internet
4. Collectively and self-managed funds for citizens' initiatives and access to public funding
5. democratization of digital radio and TV by reserving e.g. 30% of the slots for non-commercial, community etc. stations
6. participatory re-communalization/re-municipaliation of energy and water

And I'm sure there are others to add ...

It could be the right moment to start to discuss practical political proposals – not with the illusion to change European politics immediately, but with the intention to bring the debate into the light of a greater public.

Thank you for your kind attention!