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A Common Word

Aras Özgün

This response aims to discuss Michael Hardt's and Gigi Roggero's conception of the "common" vis-à-vis the modern notion of "public," and to comment on the ideological, linguistic, and affective social implications of their political-economic explication.

Key Words: Communism, Public, Property, Common, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

1

Michael Hardt's (2010) and Gigi Roggero's (2010) works are a part of the recent discussions of reviving or reformulating "communism" once again as an alternative ethico-political construction. The contemporary failure of neoliberal politics in every field it pertains to (as well as an overall social program) testifies to the timely nature of these debates and makes such an alternative utterly urgent. At this point, renegotiating the "public good" against "private interests" and retreating into the comforts of liberal democracy in an orderly fashion is no longer an option (Brown 2003). This impossibility arises not because of the absence of a general, naïve, and vague nostalgia about the good old New Deal, but because today the social antagonism inherent to capitalism has transformed beyond what could possibly be contained within the limits of a fine balance between "public" and "private," as was once implied by the political ethics of liberal democracy.

Recent literature produced around the notion of "common," by scholars coming from the Autonomist Marxist critique (to which Hardt and Roggero's works belong), constitutes a distinctly important contribution to radical political philosophy in this respect.¹ In the search for "communism," the idea of turning back to Lenin appears as the diametrical opposite of the naïve New Deal nostalgia surrounding these debates. Michael Hardt's intervention, on the contrary, suggests to shift the discussion from political decision to the critique of political economy—or, move from Lenin to Marx, so to speak. For Hardt, the post-fordist transformation of the production relations and labor and capital compositions force us to reevaluate the foundations of communist project—the critique of political-economy. In the way

1. Among these are Casarino and Negri (2008), Dyer-Witheford (2006), and Hardt and Negri (2009).

Michael Hardt describes, “common” is the foundation of biopolitical production that we have before us, upon which “communism” has to be built as an ethico-political construction. By formulating the communist project around “common” as such, as a “collective productive resource” that is not “property” (neither “private” nor “public”), Hardt’s project breaks away from past interpellations of communism which prioritized the determination of a vanguard socialist state/public.

2

Yet, perhaps our references should not be limited to “from Lenin to Marx” while rethinking communism. If, as Hardt articulates so properly, the “common” as such is “antithetical to property,” and a communist hypothesis has to be recentered as a project for its abolition (rather than its transformation into “public property”), we can find further sources and inspirations in various strains of radical and revolutionary political theories which historically remained critical to the statist tendencies dominating Marxism, from Marx to Lenin.

Joseph Proudhon, in 1840, asked the question “What is property?” and arrived at an answer, “property is theft!” Proudhon’s treatment of the notion of property perhaps did not carry the same analytical sophistication when compared with Marx’s analysis of capitalist production, but his position was quite similar to the rejection of the dichotomy between “public” and “private” property we find today in Hardt’s formulation of the “common.” “The right to property,” for Proudhon, could not be a “natural right” because it diminished the possibility of (what he called) “social equality” that was promised by “labor.” Labor constituted the “social” whereas property diminished it.² According to him, “Property and society” were “utterly irreconcilable institutions” (1840, chap. 1, pt. 1).

The “right to property” that Proudhon attacked so fiercely has to be considered as an a priori disposition of liberal governmentality; the subordination of political practice to the economic rationale could be established only after such disposition. Marx would dismiss Proudhon’s position/argument as “unnecessarily confusing” and “self-refuting” (among other things, rebuking his ignorance of Hegel) by arguing that “theft,” as a form of violation of property, could only presuppose “property” (Marx 1865). But Proudhon’s mutualist vision clearly refused “property” as a violation of the “social” as a product of “labor”—in other words, as a violation of the “common,” as we prefer to call it today—and therefore he chose to call it “theft.” Finally, in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels would advocate the state’s exclusive, monopolistic control over rent as well as other forms of “public property,” and affirm “public property” as the main pillar of their “communist” project.

2. Proudhon’s distinction between “possession” (as the direct product of labor, or a result of social exchange, which takes place in direct relation to labor process) and “property” (as directly related with surplus accumulation) is worth reexamining in the context of this debate.

Hardt's call to "look back into the critique of political economy" in order to define new grounds for the communist project involves tracing a "minor Marx"; his intention seems to be more toward identifying and adopting the precedent concerns and problematics in Marx's original critique rather than rehashing the traditional formulas of Marxist political economy. This is an invitation for returning again to what labor is, how it articulates to capital, and how it creates our social world, how it produces commodities on the one hand and commons on the other.

Autonomist criticism actually emerged from "looking back" into the critique of political economy. As a result of such reevaluation, post-operaismo scholars identified post-Fordism as a new mode of capitalist production and "immaterial labor" as a hegemonic form of labor in this new phase. "Immaterial labor," as a pivotal concept in Autonomist criticism, surpassed Marx's categorical distinction between "productive" and "unproductive" labor by pointing to the subordination of (what had been previously conceived as) "reproductive" or "unproductive" types of labor under post-Fordist production regimes. To the degree that Marx's fundamental categorical distinction also structured a whole series of political analyses and strategies following his critique of political economy, the shifting of the organizing concept from "productive labor" to "immaterial labor" also required the reformulation of some of the key notions in radical political theory. As such, immaterial labor has been the organizing concept for the key terminology of autonomist theory and politics (which includes "empire" as the political organization of post-Fordist capitalism, and "multitude" as the diffused and heterogeneous subject of global class struggle).

Along with other recent contributions to this debate, Hardt's and Roggero's treatments of the "common" become a conclusive step in the analysis of the post-Fordist biopolitical fabric. "Immaterial labor" still appears as an organizing concept in this analysis; the common today can only be understood in relation to the labor process that constitutes it, in relation to the productive force behind it. For Hardt and Roggero, the definitive characteristic of the hegemonic productive force in post-Fordism is its "social" constitution—its open, shared, collective, and cooperative form. The linguistic, informational, cognitive, and affective constituents of immaterial production are necessarily collective social resources, and these are what immaterial labor also reproduces in the course of capitalist production. In its postindustrial moment, the capitalist contradiction evolves into a new track; the productive force which capitalist production relies on at this moment can only be "productive" for capitalism to the degree that it can produce and circulate "commons"; its productivity diminishes when it is appropriated and restricted as "property." For Hart and Roggero, post-Fordism is marked by this paradox and, as such, capitalism today has to develop new techniques of rent extraction and new property and production relations, such as licensing, branding, freelancing, crowd sourcing, and so on.

4

Going back to “property relations” is a highly strategic theoretical maneuver in Hardt’s and Roggero’s works. The real interest with this maneuver does not seem to be in settling accounts with the notion of “private property” yet again because, since the nineteenth century, all forms of “communisms” have rejected this fundamental notion of capitalism in their antagonistic formulations. The critical nuance in their attempt is to formulate common as antithetical not only to “private property” but to “property in general,” including “public property.” This points to a larger target. While socialism historically appeared as a critique of liberal economic and political discourses, it took certain primary theoretical devices from these discourses and reversed the power relations they deployed.³ “Public” has been one of those theoretical devices that defined socialist alternative visions in their opposition to capitalism across all theoretical fields, but which was actually a product of eighteenth-century liberal governmentality. “Public” becomes the master signifier of socialism in its opposition to “private property,” but it still carries a reference to “ownership” relations. “Public property” is everyone’s “capital,” but it is still “capital” in the sense that it is a part of the restricted economy and its “use,” or “productivity,” is still restricted with the terms imposed by “public ownership” and limits of the definition of “public.” For example, you may have to be a “citizen,” a “taxpayer,” or even a taxpaying citizen dwelling in a specific neighborhood to use the “public education” provided by the state or city. “Public” never denotes “everybody”; it always signifies a limit set by a certain social, linguistic, or jurisprudential criterion, refers exclusively to a specific population. As such, it not only always excludes “somebody” and creates outsiders, but also abstracts a “majority will” out of a shared social situation. In this respect, the term “public” does not undo the specific set of social relations around “property” (or dispose the restrictions stemming from ownership) but delegates these relations to an abstract collective body.

Hardt’s and Roggero’s rejection of “public property” for the sake of a “communist project” brings the displacement of the term “public” from its hegemonic status of expressing an abstract collective will/body/thing. Therefore, the rejection of “public property” within the critique of political economy invites a novel political logic, which can now be conceived without having reference to the political terminology of liberal democracy. “Common” is not only “not property,” but it is also “not public”; it signifies a collective social form that is different from the “public”—it doesn’t “substitute” the “public” but transcends it. Such a theoretical intervention allows us to speak a political language that is not structured with the binary opposition imposed by classical liberal and socialist discourses, and thus makes it possible for us to imagine a different form of “collectivity.”

3. In this context it is important to be reminded that Marx’s categorical distinction between productive and unproductive labor, which I mentioned above, also was adopted from Adam Smith.

It is very predictable that abandoning the notion of “public” (or, rather, transcending it) will take a lot of heat from a larger part of the socialist camp. This was clearly the case on multiple occasions following the theoretical interventions of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. But isn’t it the very necessary thing to do, especially at this moment, when all possible uses of the term are already systematically contaminated by neoliberal politics, and whatever “public” entails —“public good,” “public sphere,” “public opinion,” “freedom of expression,” and even “democracy” at the bottom line—have become rhetorical instruments for the justification of various forms of expropriation, appropriation, and exploitation of whatever collective resources are left?

5

Proceeding from immaterial production and pointing to its paradoxical nature, Hardt and Roggero find an affirmative moment in the post-Fordist mode of capitalism for a new “communist” project; challenged by its very productive force, post-Fordist capitalism has to invent new property and production relations. If communism is the abolishment of “property,” if commons is antithetical to property, this new mode of production is affirmative of this project. Yet, such pragmatic “affirmation” in the realm of political economy can only be the material basis for a “communist project”—if what we understand from this “project” is a constitutive political ethics. While post-Fordist capitalism relies on “commons” as its productive force, it does so by subordinating these “commons” to its political/economic logic through various ideological and linguistic dispositions. Communism, then, has to be formulated as a different set of linguistic and ideological dispositions.

The word “property” has two meanings in English. The first refers to ownership, belonging, possession—the thing as “property”; while the second refers to a set of qualities, attributes, and characteristics through which we define things—the “properties” of things. These two meanings fold into each other only in a very specific context: when “property” (ownership) defines the identity (properties) of someone—in other words, when “what we own” defines “who we are.” This is a specific context; it belongs to that exclusive language that prioritizes property relations as the existential basis for social relations, “ownership” as the basis of “citizenship.” Yet, language is wider than that; while in this specific semantic context the two meanings of “property” fold into each other and refer to “identity,” the second meaning of “property” continues to reside in it without the need to refer to the first meaning. The attributes, qualities, and characteristics of “things”—their “properties”—create the fabric of “social language” beyond “identity” issues.

While discussing the “property relations” that post-Fordism entails, Hardt and Roggero confine their discussion to the foundation of “common” as an economic form that challenges the first meaning of the term. The organizing concept in their discussion, immaterial labor, already points to a “general economy” of life beyond the restricted meaning of the term around commodity production; post-Fordism entails a set of “property relations,” which already extend outside tangible commodities and things. The difference between industrial production and

biopolitical production is that, in the latter form, capitalist production tends to extend into and subsume social life in its entirety: it turns the social relations that used to take place outside the confined production spaces into “productive” relations.⁴ Therefore, what we have to understand from “economy” is life structured according to capitalist production relations through certain linguistic, legal, moral, architectural, governmental dispositions properly called “biopolitical production.”

For that very reason, in order to conceive “communism” as an ethico-political construction, we have to extend the discussion to encompass the second meaning of the term “property.” “Common” is not only a word for shared economic resources (against the notion of “property,” as “not property”), but also a word for organizing linguistic, cognitive, and affective relations, “affinities” and “commonalities,” such as what we mean by “a common word.” “Looking back at political economy” and settling the accounts with “property relations” inevitably calls for “looking forward” to “properties of relations” and linguistic postulations, to economies of desire, affections, subjectivation processes, social codes and identities. “Common property” surely does not mean “public property,” but in a “communist” context it should not even mean “the same thing” at all.

Both Hardt and Roggero strongly emphasize heterogeneity and multiplicity as the distinguishing characters of immaterial labor. The dominant form of labor in biopolitical production escapes capitalist measure and creates “commons” easily because it has a fundamental advantage, which challenges the calculative and normative logic of capitalism. That is its heterogeneous constitution; it cannot be rendered to, evaluated through, and exchanged against chronological time, and as such it refuses to become a homogenous form of “labor power.” Moreover, its constituents are necessarily diverse and multiple. The worker in the Fordist factory only needed to know how to assemble a variety of mechanical parts together whereas the worker in the Toyota factory needs to know how to use a computer; has to have social skills, language skills, and probably managerial ones, perhaps has to have engineering skills as well as a capacity to make aesthetic decisions, and certainly has to have a well-developed sense of humor to relate to the fact that he is still a worker. The “commons” generated by this heterogeneous force, then, carries a similar heterogeneity.

The ontology of commons has to reflect the ontology of labor while “communism” as a project, as a constitutive political logic, has to be postulated by affirming such heterogeneity. What we have in “common” is not a shared set of attributes, social identities, linguistic or cultural characteristics and codes, but a potential difference, our capacity and desire to host and express a multiplicity of these on the same social body at the same time, our potential difference from each other and our desire for another. Common, then, should not be defined around an abstract, transcendental, and always incomplete universal master signifier repeating in each and every subject and marking them with “individuality,” “partiality,” and “lack,” but around that potential difference, that “excess” which makes signification possible.

4. Christian Marazzi’s *Capital and Language* comes to mind in this context. Marazzi points to the fact that the post-Fordist financialization of production also clearly posits the very direct dominance of performative linguistic and affective process over rent (2008).

Once we redefine the notion of “common” as such, not on the basis of repetition and sameness but within the ontology of difference, it has to be inserted back into other words and related contexts, which requires a “common” prefix; “communication,” “community,” and so on.

“Communication” postulated in such a “communist” ontology would be something that is entirely opposite to the lingering Habermasian notion of “ideal communication”—which posits a necessary agreement among the communicating subjects in the basic terms of communication—a “common language.” It would rather resonate with Gregory Bateson’s idea that “information is a difference that makes a difference” (1972, 448–66): one can truly communicate only when confronted with a language (a “difference”) that s/he does not yet know and has to learn (that “differentiates”); one can only repeat and exchange the “order-words” rather than “communicate” within the same language (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987). Or, the notion of “community” imposed by such communist ontology is more likely to be what Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) describes as “inoperative community,” where the social “bond” is neither a shared “identity” nor an ideological/linguistic device, but a temporal and affective presence—being there, sharing the same moment, touching a stranger’s shoulder.

Hardt and Roggero’s works (despite their emphasis on starting with the “political economy,” with property relations and productive forces) inevitably bring the discussion of “political logic and will” as such. The common, in their exposition, is readily produced as an “economic form” that is the “antithesis of property” within biopolitical production. Moreover, it is the hegemonic “productive force” upon which post-Fordist capitalism relies; that is why this new form of capitalism is more affirmative for a communist project than its predecessor. If this is the case, then we can assume that what challenges such a communist project is not organized within the sphere of “economic production” (in the narrow sense of the term), nor will the presence of commons as the hegemonic productive force in this sphere automatically result in political transformation. So far capitalism has been quite successful in recapturing, subordinating, and regulating the “productive force,” which tends to escape from it eternally. It did so by capturing the desires of social subjects, by cultivating various forms of insecurities in a meticulously crafted ontology of fear, and by rewarding docility with “protection” from the world it created. Therefore, “communism” has to respond by offering another language and another ontology.

6

What about a “common word”? In an unfamiliar place, one finds herself listening to the conversations flowing around, while hoping to pick up a word that sounds familiar. Picking up a word does not make anything understandable. Rather, it “communicates” a difference as an entry point. “Oh, we say that too, what does it mean in your language?” For example, “Jhan” in Armenian means “body”: it is also used as a diminutive suffix to names (like Norajhan, Nazarethjhan, and so on). “Can” in Turkish, pronounced exactly the same way and also used as a diminutive suffix (like Nurcan, Mehmetcan, and so on) means “soul.” Such is a “common word”; it always means something slightly different, and it is that difference that fulfills the meaning

of the “word” and makes it “common.” Perhaps “communism” should not be a “project,” but just a “common word.”

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