

SANDRO MEZZADRA

Pandemic Crisis, Struggles for the Common and the Task of Reinventing the Welfare

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of *Praktyka Teoretyczna* journal, we have invited our long-lasting collaborators and comrades to reflect once again on the concept of the common and its possible futures by posing the following questions: a) what is the most important aspect of the current struggles for the common?; b) what are the biggest challenges for the communist politics of the future?; and c) where in the ongoing struggles do you see a potential for scaling-up and spreading organisation based on the common? In his reply, Sandro Mezzadra draws our attention to contemporary struggles around welfare, which push us to reinvent such notions and institutions like public health or education beyond the private and the public.

Keywords: the common, welfare, reproduction, cooperation

The common indeed provides us with an effective angle on the dynamics of the pandemic and at the same time emerges once again as a powerful alternative framework within which to articulate a panoply of struggles for a different world. To start with, just think about the radical environmental disruption of the commonality of the earth, which paved the way for spillover events and for the spread of coronavirus.

It is difficult to write about the politics of the common these days without taking into account the global pandemic crisis we are living through. The common indeed provides us with an effective angle on the dynamics of the pandemic and at the same time emerges once again as a powerful alternative framework within which to articulate a panoply of struggles for a different world. To start with, just think about the radical environmental disruption of the commonality of the earth, which paved the way for spillover events and for the spread of coronavirus. And do not forget the dismantlement of public welfare systems in many parts of the world, which has been widely discussed as a new form of enclosure of the commons and has definitely contributed to intensifying the impact of the pandemic. Moreover, the fact that the coronavirus disproportionately hit the poor, racialized minorities, and indigenous communities, sheds light on the persisting relevance of old lines of partition of the common that have their roots in histories of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and class. At the same time, the most significant social movements and struggles that have characterized the last months – from Black Lives Matter to feminist movements, from mobilizations around the issues of public health and education to labor struggles in sectors deemed as “essential” during lockdowns – can all be read as instantiations of a politics of the common.

There would be much to say about the ways in which the common is at stake in the movements I just mentioned, as well as in many others (think for instance of migration struggles, which did not stop and even intensified in many parts of the world during the pandemic crisis). Doing that would require a detailed conceptual discussion on the common in singular, as well as on the commons in plural, in order to go beyond the fixation on the physical commons (according to the model of “common land”) that often characterizes debates on the topic. Take for instance Black Lives Matter in the U.S. The common is at stake here not simply because it is a movement against “systemic racism”, and therefore against hierarchical lines of partitioning the commonality of the human, and against processes of segregation that violently cross and divide common urban spaces and the very common fabric of citizenship. There is something more to be added. Black insurgency in the wake of the murder of George Floyd opened up a new common space, laying the basis for a politics of coalition that assembled a panoply of heterogeneous subjects and movements (from the *latinxs* to sexual dissidences, just to mention two of them) and gave rise to a collective power predicated upon an interplay and reciprocal empowerment of differences. This is a powerful instantiation of the political logic of the common, which constructs

subjectivity in a way that is fundamentally different from the classical modern emphasis on the bipolar structure of the “private/public.”

Having said this, I would like to focus here on just one topic that I find particularly relevant in Europe today. I will do it keeping in mind the mobilizations around the issues of public health and education that I mentioned above, and I will ask whether the field of welfare can become a strategic field for a politics of the common against the background of the pandemic crisis. In order to tackle with this question, we have to note first of all that the response of European institutions to the current crisis has been fundamentally different from the one to the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007/2008 (meaning to the “sovereign debt crisis” since 2009). You will definitely remember the Greek crisis, which reached its apex in July 2015, the litany of austerity, the violent disciplinary and punitive inflection of neoliberalism in those years. And we are all aware of the huge amount of pain and suffering inflicted by such policies on reluctant populations, particularly in the South of the European continent, with the ensuing entrenchment of the plunder of the commons. It was the continuation of several decades of European neoliberal policies, now with an authoritarian twist. The point is however that it did not work, even from a capitalist point of view. The pandemic hit European societies and economies while the virus of the previous crisis continued to circulate, with stagnation and impoverishment characterizing many of them. I am convinced that this is the main reason why European institutions reacted to the pandemic crisis in a quite different way, which meant suspending the harshest neoliberal rules of the Stability Pact, covering up deficit spending through the expansive monetary policy of European Central Bank, and foreshadowing a mutualization of debt to launch the ambitious “Next Generation EU” recovery plan.

Needless to say, there would be much to discuss here. Are we confronted with a structural change in the EU or merely with a temporary adjustment? Even if we acknowledge that the measures I quickly listed imply a significant shift from neoliberalism at the macroeconomic level, what about the way in which the mobilized resources will be distributed and used? Will not the neoliberal logic of competition, entrepreneurship, and human capital continue to be dominant? These are all important questions that would deserve a detailed discussion. For now, I limit myself to noting that in the current conjuncture what we are confronted with is a hypothesis of the *capitalist* stabilization of the crisis. It is important not to forget this key point, but at the same time it is also important to note that such hypothesis implies a significant shift of the very terrain

For decades we have been struggling against and resisting cuts to public expenditure and welfare, and in the next months and years we will be struggling for the use of resources that will increase public expenditure in an unprecedented way. We will be struggling for the appropriation of significant shares of social wealth. And the common will be at the very center of these struggles.

of political action and conflict. This is of course also relevant for social movements and struggles. I will put it in a very simple way. For decades we have been struggling against and resisting cuts to public expenditure and welfare, and in the next months and years we will be struggling for the use of resources that will increase public expenditure in an unprecedented way. We will be struggling for the appropriation of significant shares of social wealth. And the common will be at the very center of these struggles.

As I have mentioned above, the question of welfare has often been discussed from the angle of the common. In particular, the dismantling of state welfare systems both in post-socialist transitions and those of advanced capitalism has been widely interpreted through the lens provided by Marx's analysis of "the so-called primitive accumulation" and as an instance of the "enclosure of the commons." Such dismantling (and the ensuing reorganization) of welfare systems actually opened up new avenues for the valorization of capital in fields like health, education, and housing. It is important to stress, however, that when speaking of welfare as a strategic terrain for a politics of the common today, I neither imagine nor uphold a "return" to the welfare state of the 20th century in any of its multiple instantiations. To put it briefly, the Western variant of the welfare state was entirely predicated upon the material conditions of industrial mass production and upon the movements of the industrial working class. While acknowledging significant social commons, the state monopolized their management, in forms that were violently attacked by social movements in the 1960s and 1970s (just think of the struggle of the feminist movements against the "family wage" and the patriarchal character of social policies). The point cannot be therefore to "return" to that welfare state, it is rather to *reinvent* social policies and the very notion of "welfare."

An important angle for a critique of the welfare state is provided by the concept of class composition. I already stressed the role played by the industrial (Fordist, if you wish) working class in the welfare state of the 20th century in the West. The power of the working class was both acknowledged and mystified here, while the role of workers as consumers was crucial for the general equilibrium of capitalism in an age of mass production. The fact is that today we are confronted with a completely different class composition, and a reflection upon the issue of welfare cannot but take it as its necessary point of departure. Writing with Brett Neilson, we have often emphasized the heterogeneity of contemporary living labor, what we call the "multiplication of labor." We have also attempted to grasp its new composition from a conceptual point of view,

speaking of a gap between living labor and the social cooperation crisscrossing it in many parts of the world. What we mean by that is that labor as a whole is increasingly characterized by a cooperative dimension while the embodied experience of labor is separated from that dimension (which means that for workers is often difficult to gain control of the cooperative power in which their daily activity is immersed). To this one should add that the boundary between work and life is becoming increasingly elusive today for many people, as well as the boundary between production and reproduction. Following the lead of feminist movements and thinkers, I consider the latter question particularly relevant, and I am convinced that the notion of reproduction (which is of course linked to the question of cooperation) provides us with an effective angle to rethink the whole issue of welfare.

What I called the cooperative dimension of labor is today at the very center of social policies. And this cooperative dimension can be managed in a purely individual and disciplinary way (as it is the case in neoliberal systems of workfare). But it is definitely possible to imagine a full acknowledgment of social cooperation, through systems of protection able to acknowledge the multiple differences constituting living labor today but at the same time enhancing its productivity and power. This is the horizon within which we have to frame struggles for welfare in Europe. And we have to imagine and promote a politics of coalition to nurture and support those struggles. The most significant social movements of the present have outstanding roles to play here. I have already mentioned the feminist critique of the patriarchal character of social policies, which is no less important today. Environmental movements and struggles raise crucial questions regarding the quality of development underlying the expansion of welfare, while they politicize in new ways the issue of territory, in particular with respect to the organization of public health. Migrant and antiracist movements politicize the borders of welfare, and more generally its relation with citizenship, while their struggle against racism in society continues to be crucially important. Needless to say, each of these movements has a lot to say also on other aspects of struggles for welfare. And this is what makes the politics of coalition in this case particularly promising and engaging, in a way following the example of Black Lives Matter discussed at the beginning.

It should be clear that struggling for welfare challenges us to test and reinvent such notions and institutions like public health and education, which are crucial components of any concept of the common. But struggles for welfare are struggles for the common also in another sense. Just think of the mix between public and private that characterizes

But it is definitely possible to imagine a full acknowledgment of social cooperation, through systems of protection able to acknowledge the multiple differences constituting living labor today but at the same time enhancing its productivity and power. This is the horizon within which we have to frame struggles for welfare in Europe.

contemporary welfare systems in many parts of the world. As I was writing before, we have been insisting for several years now that the common has literally no place between the two poles of public and private. The common points indeed to a different principle of organization, which can nurture the proliferation of specific institutions of the common. And what characterizes such institutions is the principle of self-organization and autonomy. While we contest the private-public mix in welfare systems, we do not want to return to the monopolization of the commons by the state that we experienced in the 20th century. A politics of the common in the field of welfare will necessarily work toward the creation of autonomous institutions capable of coexisting with public institutions, prompting the formulation of social policies, struggling for their implementation, negotiating and, when necessary, conflicting with public institutions. This is of course a big challenge, and I can only outline its implications and even pitfalls here. But I think it is worth taking it up in the current conjuncture in Europe.

SANDRO MEZZADRA – teaches political theory at the University of Bologna. His scholarly work has centered on borders and migration, contemporary capitalism and globalization, Marx and workerism. With Brett Neilson he is the author of *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013) and of *The Politics of Operations. Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2019).

Address:

University of Bologna
Department of the Arts

email: sandro.mezzadra@unibo.it

Citation:

Mezzadra, Sandro. 2020. "Pandemic Crisis, Struggles for the Common and the Task of Reinventing the Welfare." *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4(38): 135–141.

DOI: 10.14746/prt2020.4.7

Autor: Sandro Mezzadra

Tytuł: Kryzys pandemiczny, walki o to, co wspólne i wyzwanie wynalezienia na nowo welfare

Abstrakt: Z okazji 10 urodzin *Praktyki Teoretycznej* zaprosiliśmy naszych wieloletnich współpracowników i towarzyszy do wspólnego rozważenia przyszłości tego, co wspólne. Poprosiliśmy ich o zmierzenie się z następującymi pytaniami: a) co jest najważniejszym aspektem współczesnych walk o to, co wspólne?; b) jakie największe wyzwania stoją w przyszłości przed polityką tego, co wspólne?; c) gdzie w ramach toczonych walk wiedzieć potencjał na rozwijanie i poszerzanie organizacji opartej na tym, co wspólne? Mierząc się z powyższymi pytaniami Sandro Mezzadra zwraca uwagę na współczesne walki wokół welfare, które zmuszają nas do pomyślenia i stworzenia na nowo takich instytucji jak opieka zdrowotna czy edukacja poza podziałem na publiczne i prywatne.

Słowa kluczowe: to, co wspólne; welfare; reprodukcja; kooperacja