



GIGI ROGGERO

To Avoid the Farce of the Common

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, Gigi Roggero draws our attention to the necessity of maintaining the link between the common, subjectivity and class composition, if we are to preserve the revolutionary potential of the concept and the practice it implies.

Keywords: the common, the commons, goodcommonists, class composition, subjectivity

It is a long time since we discussed the political concept of the *common* at a conference organized by Polish comrades in Warsaw. It was 2011, in the middle of the «occupy» movement cycle – from Spain to Us, before there were the university struggles and the insurrections in North Africa, the mobilizations in Turkey and Brazil would follow. Embodied in that context, the common we discussed was not a generic allusion, it was not a natural good to be defended, it was not a juridical technicality. The commune was a matter of relations of production, hence of relations of force and antagonism. It was not a timeless aspiration, but a historically determined battlefield.

So ten years have passed, but it is not just a question of chronology, or simply time in a quantitative sense. The matter is first of all a qualitative question. During this time, in fact, on the one hand that cycle of struggles has exhausted its power of autonomous expression, leaving sedimentations or legacies of different types; on the other hand, the economic-financial crisis (within which those movements were born, within and against) has deepened and changed, transforming the context. As political militants, we know very well that a concept is like a tool we use to interpret and force the reality: if it works for this purpose, fine; if not, we have to forge a new tool, or at least modify it. We must therefore retrace the genealogy of the debate on the common in the light of the present and its contradictions – whether actual or potential – in order to arrive at answers to the questions that our Polish comrades are asking and asking of us. We will do so stenographically, in the attempt to mention some unresolved issues and open problems.

Different visions of the common

We can schematically identify different visions of the common (and the commons) developed in the international debate.

First, there is a *naturalistic* view of the commons declined in the plural, that is, the commons imagined as pure and uncontaminated things to be defended from the appropriation of capital, understood as an external subject and not as an overall social relation. They would constitute an «outside», something that comes first and – it is not clear how – would not be subsumed and commodified. Disembodied from historically determined relations of production, the common here becomes a fetish that leads to nostalgia for a mythological past, swept away and destroyed by the development of capital. Regardless of how much the struggles themselves have often, in their own way, destroyed that

past, this view can be described as romantic, in the far from positive terms in which Marx spoke of it.

Then, there is an *institutionalist* vision of the common and commons, according to which they are determined by institutional recognition. This juridification of the common, on which at least in Italy there has been a certain amount of initiative some years ago in relation to mobilizations particularly of art workers, ends up inverting the materiality of the relation between struggles and law: it is no longer the former that determine the latter, but viceversa. Foundations and charters of the commons were not proposed as an eventual tactical step of the movements for the common, but rather as their strategic objective. It is not juridical technicalities that are put at the service of struggles, but the opposite. In this separation between *benecomunisti* [*goodcommonists*] experts and the bearers of the need for the common, a class identification of the common is also produced, which ends up corresponding to specific figures and behaviours, mostly those of the intellectual and professional classes in search of political recognition on the one hand, and of the proletarianized middle classes on the other.

Now it is necessary to problematize what we can define as an *essentialist* vision of the common, into which a significant part of what has been defined as «post-operaismo» (a term to which we will return later) flows. Although starting from a correct critique of *goodcommonist* naturalism and the assumption of the common as an element of production, in this vision there is the risk of falling into a new naturalism, this time an ontological one: in fact, it is assumed that from «cognitive labor» automatically and immediately comes free social cooperation, and from this the common. But the common is rooted in a historically determined ambivalence: the cooperation that constitutes the material framework of the possibility of autonomy, is at the same time cooperation for capitalist exploitation. And in social cooperation the form of capitalist organization does not disappear but is redefined, while within capture there is commanded living labor. Even when we talk about the «capture of the common», we must not mean the transition to a parasitic capitalism: the company must organize the work of the capturers. Social cooperation is therefore not exclusively self-organized, just as it is not organized exclusively by the master. Capital, in fact, is a social relation: since cooperation is located within this relation, freedom and autonomy are always at stake and never given as a starting point. In the absence of elements of antagonism and rupture, formal technical independence does not correspond to political autonomy.

Let us be clear: we are not proposing a vision that is fideistically

entrusted to the spontaneous development of struggles. On the contrary, we are criticizing a vision entrusted, fideistically, to the simple recognition given by an external subject, be it the State, local or supranational institutions, or the academic community. In these visions the materiality of class compositions and relations of exploitation and struggle disappears; it remains only a disembodied utopia. Certainly, fundamental to the definition of the common is its capacity to produce institution, as organization of autonomy, new collective norms and power. But who institutes the common? From a revolutionary point of view, it is the process of subjectivation and the potential for breaking with the given forms of social cooperation; today these forms belong to the capital, or at least are primarily used by it. In fact, most of the visions outlined above lack an interpretation of the formation of the subjectivity that produces the common. For us, what is decisive is not the element of the recognition, but rather the process of producing a subject of the common that is capable of breaking with and overturn the capital social relation. Otherwise, the risk is to imagine the common not in a strong sense, as a dualism of power, but in a weak sense, as something that is created in the interstices of capitalist accumulation, a sort of free and unpaid reproduction, which thus becomes compatible subsidiarity, governable marginality, or functional outburst. This is the goodcommonism of capital. In this case, the tragedy of the commons is followed by its farce.

Common, class composition, subjectivity

Class composition and subjectivity are two key political concepts. Let us begin briefly with the first, which has its roots in the tradition of Italian revolutionary operaismo. It is constituted by the relation between technical and political composition, i.e., between the capitalist articulation of labor power in its combination with machines, and the formation of the class as a collective subject. Be careful, however: we must not understand either of these terms in a static way. That is, technical composition is not simply a photography of the structure of exploitation, nor is political composition the indication of an autonomous subject already realized. The articulation and hierarchization of labor power are set in motion by workers' and proletarians' behaviours, while the political formation of the class lives in a permanent tension between autonomy and its subsumption. The social relation of capital, insofar as it is antagonistic, is internal to both the technical and the political composition; it determines and transforms them. What subjectivity is, we say

with Romano Alquati: «it is the system of beliefs, visions and conceptions, representations, knowledge and culture for certain aspects and values; and of desires, certain aspects of the imaginary and also of passions and wills, options, etc. It is a system characterized by historicity and sociality, and therefore evolving in a processual manner. In fact, the formation also contributes to producing and transforming subjectivity.» Over the last few decades, on the wave of mainstream Foucaultism and post-structuralism, when the term has become commonplace in political debate, the subjectivity has been imagined as a positive quality *in sé*. This is a mistake: subjectivity is produced within the capitalist social relation, it lives within a clash and a relation of forces. Subjectivity is a battlefield. The point is to transform subjectivity into *counter-subjectivity*, breaking the extraordinary machine of subjectivation of capital. We must even go so far as to hate ourselves, that is, the relation of capital that is embodied in our labor force and our subjectivity, and which we compulsorily and acceptingly reproduce.

Similarly, starting from the banal assumption that the relation between technical and political composition can no longer be thought of in the same way as it was in the coordinates between the Taylorist factory and the Fordist society, the erroneous conclusion has often been reached that it is necessary to erase these terms and, above all, the problem of their relation. In many cases, this has led to technical composition being read immediately as political composition, i.e. looking away from the capitalist formation of subjectivity and the command over the transformations of labor. Without a process of recomposition, i.e. of conflict and counter-subjectivation, singularities float in the flows of capital and do not condense into a collective autonomous subject. And the common captured by capital is confused with the common conquered against capital. Mario Tronti argues that there is no class without class struggle. In the same way we can say that there is no common without a struggle for the common. There is no struggle for the common without subjectivity of the common. And there are no institutions of the commune without a break with existing institutions.

Starting afresh

The definition of post-operaismo was born in Anglo-Saxon and American universities as an attempt to capture the power of operaismo, depoliticize it and abstract it from conflict and class composition. To make it good for the academy and the political economy of knowledge,

that is, good for nothing. Now it has become «Italian theory», to complete the process of fencing off and putting a value on a thought that has been purposely emptied and disarmed. International conferences are organized in prestigious universities, people are specializing in post-operaismo, small and large enclosures are built, and academic careers are attempted. Goodbye «post-operaismo».¹

This generic and not at all neutral definition is used to refer to the common, albeit differentiated, space that arose at the end of the 1980s to analyze the forms of production and work that had risen from the crisis of Taylorism-Fordism, seeking to overturn the annihilating images of the end of history and single thought. The polemical objective was and remains correct, the practical development not always up to scratch. This gave rise to the theorization of so-called «post-Fordism,» and then gradually to attempts to identify new subjects of conflict that incorporated knowledge and social cooperation. Some of these attempts were problematic from the outset, others have been extremely productive and can still be, provided they are rethought within the changes that have occurred in the crisis and the exhaustion of an overall model. Today, it is not possible to reintroduce the concept of cognitive work (or rather the cognitivization of work, thus underlining a process of cognitivization of exploitation) in the same form as in the early 2000s. In the midst of this there is a crisis that has become permanent, the explosion of the middle class, a radical stratification of cognitive labor, the banalization, serialization and impoverishment of the labor power, in other words an acceleration of the process of industrialization of knowledge.

The point is precisely this: we must make a Machiavellian return to principles. Otherwise we run the risk of ossifying the categories, of transfiguring them into dogmas, of making operaismo become what it never was: a school and not a movement of thought. We should therefore perhaps say that post-operaismo is over. Now, just as the operaisti returned to Marx against Marxism, we must return to operaismo in order to move forward, in order to put that revolutionary method back to work in and against reality.

Therefore, having gone through the concept in its entirety, having tested it against reality, having passed it through the thread of critical problematic interpretations, the common must now be reworked – or decomposed and recomposed – within the capital-crisis, that is, the

1 For more on this and other topics analyzed in this text, see the interview available at <https://viewpointmag.com/2020/04/30/a-science-of-destruction-an-interview-with-gigi-roggero-on-the-actuality-of-operaismo/>.

crisis as a form of political command and device of war, within the historically determined relation between class composition and processes of subjectivation. The common must be identified in the possibility of building institutions of autonomy and counter-power (i.e. dualism of power, nothing to do with the checks and balances of today's politics). The traces of the common must be found within the materiality and ambivalence of class behaviour and struggles, and must be collectively organized and transformed.

Once it used to be said: starting afresh is not the same as going back. There we go. I remember that in 2011, in a debate in a museum in Warsaw, I spoke of a contradictory feeling: the power of that common beauty to re-appropriate, the instinctive desire to set fire to that universal exhibition of beauty-commodity. Reappropriation and rupture go together, unless one simply wants to become a functionary and manager of the capitalist institutions of the common. In short, after the decades of postmodern weak thought and the years of diatribes between scholastic ideologies, we are shown here how there is no constituent power without destituent power, to act for without to act against, the desire without the hate.

Can we still call this research with the label of the common, or do we have to mark a discontinuity also from the point of view of the political lexicon? I don't know, and I don't think it is a decisive question. What is decisive is to prefigure new elements which, within movements that are constitutively ambiguous, contradictory and spurious, can allow us to identify the traces of possible ruptures to come.

GIGI ROGGERO - is a militant in the Hobo collective, is part of the editorial board of *Commonware*, and is an autonomous researcher. Among his various books and essays, he is author of *The Production of Living Knowledge* (Temple University Press, 2011), *Futuro anteriore and Gli operaisti* (DeriveApprodi, 2002 and 2005), *Elogio della militanza and Il treno contro la Storia* (DeriveApprodi, 2016 and 2017), and a most recent book, *L'operaismo politico italiano: Genealogia, storia, metodo* (DeriveApprodi, 2019).

Address:

DeriveApprodi
srl. Piazza Regina Margherita 27,
00198 Roma, Italy
email: conricerca@hotmail.com

Citation:

Roggero, Gigi. 2020. "To Avoid the Farce of the Common." *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4(38): 161-168.
DOI: 10.14746/prt2020.4.16

Autor: Gigi Roggero

Tytuł: Uniknijmy farsy tego, co wspólne

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 wiedzicie potencjał na rozwijanie i poszerzanie organizacji opartej na tym, co wspólne?