

The commons as unifying political vision

*Sophie Bloemen*¹

The crisis of the European Union begs for new, unifying and constructive narratives – alternatives to the right-wing populist and nationalist wave that is getting fiercer every day. A ‘commons’ approach holds the potential for a unified vision towards an alternative economy, a Europe from the bottom-up, and an ecological economy and way of life. The idea of jointly stewarding shared resources, community, and a generative economy can find resonance with a diverse range of citizens.

Major fault lines are starting to appear in the dominant world-view based on individualism, private ownership and an extractive relationship with nature. Although this view is still pervasive in economics, politics and law, a novel outlook based on networks, access and sustainability is emerging (Capra&Mattei, 2015). The online environment, where knowledge is shared and co-produced on a large scale, has made a huge contribution to this shift in perspective (Benkler, 2006).

The predominant discourses that permeate political discussions at the European Union level are, however, those of economic growth, competitiveness and efficiency – considerations that tend to trump everything else. The lion’s share of the European Union’s policy focuses on macro-economic indicators and the promotion of large commercial interests. Citizens are often viewed simply as entrepreneurs or consumers.

This dominant outlook follows the logic of the ‘*homo economicus*’, the fictional abstract individual of standard economics, who maximises his personal material gain through rational calculation. The underlying Cartesian subject-object dualism, in which mind is divorced from nature, leads to the perception that the world is there for humans to dominate

1 | An earlier version of this article has been co-written with David Hammerstein.

and use. In addition, these models do not take into account the limits of our cognitive capacities or the limits of natural resources. As a result, it rationalises a view in which agents, when presented with the possibility to extract value from nature for their personal benefit, should always do so.

An ensuing focus on markets and growth has blinded us from the loss of social cohesion, rampant inequality, and the destruction of the environment. In the perceived need to quantify everything, gross domestic product is used as a measure of social wealth. Modern property rights and the dominant concept of ownership as an individual right protected by the State, to allow short-term accumulation, are central to the materialistic orientation and extractive mentality that lie at the root of today's global ecological crisis. The commodification of our common resources, and even our online behaviour, seem limitless.

The commons

The commons perspective stands in stark contrast to the policy priorities that currently dominate in Europe. The commons refers to shared resources and frameworks for social relationships, managed by community. Commons also stands for a world-view and ethical perspective favouring stewardship, reciprocity and social and ecological sustainability. This outlook defines well-being and social wealth not just by narrow economic criteria like gross domestic product or a company's success. Instead, it looks to a richer, more qualitative set of criteria that are not easily measured – including moral legitimacy, social consensus and participation, equity, resilience, social cohesion and social justice (Ostrom&Hess, 2007).

The commons discourse considers people as actors who are deeply embedded in social relationships, communities and local ecosystems, instead of regarding society as a collection of atomised individuals, principally living as consumers or entrepreneurs. Human motivation is more diverse than maximising material self-interest alone: we are social beings and human cooperation and reciprocity are at least *as important* in driving our actions (Bollier, 2014: 112). This more holistic perspective considers human activity as part of the larger, living biophysical world. Recognising the multiple domains of people's lives, bottom-up, decentralised and participatory approaches to our major social

and environmental dilemmas provide functional solutions to the current environmental and social crises facing our continent.

The idea of the commons does not fit within the traditional ideological frameworks of Left and Right. However, it does provide a clear ethical perspective and helps us appreciate and understand the value of people collectively stewarding resources, without the dominant, centralised roles of the market or the State. The commons are not primarily a political theory, but first and foremost *a practice emerging from the bottom-up*. Everywhere, people are engaged in alternative practices as part of the struggle for ecological, social and cultural transition within their communities.

All over Europe, local initiatives are seeking to take care of their direct environment, are sharing and stewarding knowledge online and claiming natural resources as our commons. Examples include community wi-fi structures, providing access to the internet in remote areas, co-housing initiatives ensuring affordable housing, community land trusts that explore collective forms of property and urban commons initiatives working to regenerate the city for its citizens. The digital knowledge commons are a key element of an alternative economy and online commons projects have attained an impressive scale. Creative commons licenses for cultural works, for example, are now over one billion. There is Wikipedia, by far the world's largest and most used encyclopaedia, and Firefox, which offers a free and open source alternative to Apple's Safari and Microsoft's Internet Explorer. About half of all administrative bodies in the EU are as of now using open source-software. In all these areas, the commons approach offers a new vocabulary for collective action and social justice. It opens up ways of reshaping processes for the governance of resources by communities themselves.

Cultural change and political struggle

All this while European civil society, NGOs and social justice networks, up to now have not been able to unite around a broadly shared agenda. Hundreds of organisations united in the fight against the TTIP, a trade agreement driven by the interests of large corporations and negotiated in a highly un-transparent manner. However, in order to make progress towards another, fairer and ecological economy and society, a movement cannot be solely reactionary; it has to set the agenda. The emerging radical initiatives that have been proposing alternatives have mostly been

engaged at a national or local level, rather than on the European level. Examples are '15M' in Spain, 'Nuit de Bout' in France and the University occupation in Amsterdam. Occupy was translocal, but did not succeed in really opening up the conversation in Europe. Local struggles, forward-looking and emancipatory projects, will have to be connected in order to really be strong. The national and local levels are essential, but not enough. The fact is that a great deal of the laws and developments that shape our societies come from the European level and global markets. Civil society has to have translocal and transnational solidarity around a shared vision of an alternative society.

We see this vision of an alternative society emerging, both in theory and political beliefs, but even more so in practice. It is emerging in the way people choose to live their lives. Whilst societal changes we experience are often cast in terms of economy or technologies and are dependent on a favourable institutional environment, they are often rooted in *cultural change*. Our culture reflects and shapes our values and how we attribute meaning to our lives. Cultural change is therefore a key driver for social transformation. Many current community-led and social innovation initiatives and practices are enabling communities to be generative, instead of extractive, outside of the market and State. This is creating a new civic and cultural ethic that breaks with conventional notions of citizenship and participation. The regenerative activities of commoners showcase, above all, cultural manifestations of new ways of daily life.

At the same time, the perspective of the commons unites many different struggles; the struggle for managing water as a common good, of managing our energy locally and sustainably, of being able to share knowledge, from affordable medicines and limiting patents, to struggles around the urban environment and citizen participation and new forms of democracy. All of these concern the participatory and equitable management of common goods in a sustainable matter: goods that are fundamental to everyone's well-being and flourishing.

European commons assembly

The European Commons Assembly² that took place in Brussels in November has been a case in point for the unifying potential of the commons. The movement of commoners has been growing across Europe over the last decade, but with the Assembly it came together for the first time in a political transnational European constellation. The objectives of the meetings were multiple, but the foremost goal was to connect and form a stable but informal transnational commons movement in Europe. Over 150 Europeans came to Brussels, and in a symbolic move of reclaiming Europe, met for half a day in the European Parliament. They came to develop new synergies, express solidarity and to discuss European politics, as well as policy proposals. Europe's democratically elected Members of the European Parliament exchanged views with the 'Commons Assembly', made up of a myriad of commoners, activists and social innovators from many different corners of Europe.

The political energy generated by bringing all these people together in this context was exceptional. The Assembly included important discussions, about the relationship between 'the Left' and local commons movements, between practical examples of building alternatives on the ground and macro political and economic visions of Europe. These conversations have to be about philosophy and vision, yet also about whom we are addressing and what is to be included or excluded in our narrative. How to build broader coalitions on the ground, not bound to the Left or Right, how to prevent erecting walls with academic language and theory, and indeed, how to attract conservative commoners. The Assembly will continue as a political process and diverse platform that still needs to find its way, yet holds a great deal of potential.

How to move forward

People left behind by globalisation find themselves in a world where economic insecurity is the default and everything is for sale. Moreover, globalisation and the focus on the individual has led to the loss of familiar culture and community and the loss of a clear national identity. Instead of rejecting these sentiments, we need to acknowledge them, for they

2 | <https://europeancommonsassembly.eu/>

are real. The commons embrace predominantly progressive values, but they are not about de-localised cosmopolitanism. Instead, the commons depend on the local environment and resources, on community, traditions, care and trust. Rather than letting the political backlash lead to Europe's disintegration, we should turn our gaze to what is below, to what people are creating locally, what is happening on the ground. That is where there is hope and energy, that is where people are jointly stewarding their own resources, be it local energy cooperatives or online initiatives such as Wikipedia.

As we build this movement, we can do our best to improve networking, campaign tactics and alliances³. We have to ask ourselves however, how does a commons movement as a political force relate to conventional political power? There is a tension between conventional political advocacy and 'commoning'. If the building of an alternative economy is the primary task, is it then the main role of advocacy and politics in favour of the commons which will be able to facilitate the building of such an economy? And should we not focus first and foremost on the deepening of democracy, as the role of representative democratic structures are part of the problem? These are questions the commons movement, and the political advocates involved, have to keep asking themselves. The role of local initiatives in the political platform has to be addressed and developed in such a way that we find a functioning and satisfying configuration. Otherwise, the movement risks being neutralised and domesticated in the policy venues that are so crucial in protecting and facilitating the flourishing of the commons.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benkler, Y. (2006): *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Bollier, D. (2014): *Think Like a Commoner: A short introduction to the life of the commons*. Canada: New Society Publishers.

3 | The reflections in this paragraph are based on an exchange with David Bollier in September 2016.

- Capra, F.&Mattei, U. (2015): The Ecology of Law. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Elinor, O.&Hess, C. (2007): Understanding Knowledge as a Commons, MIT Press