

Pick the right modernity: Towards a coalition for common goods

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Times are harsh. In the US, in Europe or in Australia, a solid neo-conservative alliance is building up. This alliance stresses security issues in international and domestic policy, and puts on stages all types of threats. It is dressed in neo-liberal clothes, invoking rights that it intends to make good only for the profit of some large economic players and a limited cast. It ignores social facts with arrogance. It is determined to reduce governments to roles of peace-keeper and servant of networks of interests. In some countries, it builds upon a degree of control on centralised media that is without precedent in modern times. Faced to this alliance, the left-wing parties are numbed, made impotent by the loss of power of their previous modes of action. The left does not know where to look for a new legitimacy. It tries to defend social rights, institutions and modes of actions that are fragilised by deep changes in technology, in the organisation of production and of exchanges, in time budgets and consumption behaviours, or in urban planning, housing and transportation. Some of the leaders of the left noticing it, they try to recover by espousing the methods and ideas of their adversaries, claiming to put them to service of the values of the left, when this leads only to damage them further. As a result, politics themselves lose credibility, notably among those for which investment in political and social action should be one of the paths towards a better integration to society.

This depressing scene is not a product of fatality. It expresses the blindness of the political world, including in its most noble components, towards the revolution that was brought into our world by information technology and informational technology. ICT, but also bio-technology have set our world since 30 years into 2 contradictory motions. One towards more concentration of value, of power and of influence through the capitalization of information and of its manipulation. The other towards the co-operative production and social usage of new informational common goods. The first trend contributes to the financialization of the economy, and to the creation of industrial monsters, whose commerce is no longer in goods or services, but rather in the monopolies granted to them by a ever extended patentability, and by the restrictive management of copyright and trademarks. The second trend gives us free software, open scientific publishing, new global thematic coalitions (environment, development, fair trade, etc.), co-operative media and new art forms. The first trend exceeds capitalism in a grotesque caricature. The second redefines it and overcomes some of its limitations in the creation of new common goods and their public space.

However, if the first movement today has a clear and powerful political translation, the second errs without finding one. The reason is that to build a political alliance around the new common goods, one must be able to give answers to some difficult questions. The new common goods do not appear in empty space. They arise in a world in which the economy of physical goods remains dominant, and determines most people's subsistence. They develop in a world where elementary social rights, access to education, health, justice, etc. depend on the capacity of governments at all geographical scales to act, when precisely governments and local authorities more and more lack the means to act. The same technological and social trends that make the new common goods and co-operative endeavours possible – that is the large scale development of non-monetary exchanges - contribute to deprive public actors from resources whose collection remains entirely indexed on the parameters of the former situation (income from salary, monetary exchanges in the commerce of

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physical goods).

The credibility of political movements that wish to build upon the new common goods rests on their ability to redefine the role of economic players and governments, and to pass clear alliances, in summary to build a coalition whose borders are much wider than those of the conscious promoters of the commons.

The driving lines that could be promoted by such a coalition are:

- The stand for a quality-oriented approach to the economy, based on contemporary definitions of social, environmental, urban, cultural and esthetical quality. In many cases, quality can not be prescribed, because one can not define it a-priori, but it can be searched for by setting conditions that favour it, and it must be evaluated continuously. We must find back under new forms the best of what keynesian social-democracy gave us, that is mechanisms to orient the economy without setting excessive controls or transaction costs. This with the clear affirmation that yes, such orientation is legitimate, and calls for creating and maintaining competency and means to act in governments and in public debate, opposite to the blind and stupid government and public that large-moneyed interests would like as an ideal servant. Only a quality-oriented approach to the economy can turn it again to a creator of valuable employment and of social meaning.
- The invention of new ways to measure wealth, and new ways to collect the resources of public action through taxation, in such a way that these resources will not become scarcer in proportion of the development of informational exchanges. One interesting track, that the pro Tobin tax movements have partly suggested, is to tax in priority those flows that correspond to the capitalisation of information and to the financialization of the economy. In this manner, the information society trends will contribute to public good either directly (through the creation of commons goods) or indirectly (through taxation).
- The resolute action to limit the power of centralised informational monopolies, through limits to the scope of and the possibility to capitalise intellectual property titles, and through the reinvestment of research and development by public actors. One must see a true surge to end the leniency that leads today's governments and international organisations to rivalise in subservience towards a few multinationals of proprietary software, pharmaceuticals, agro-food, and for other reasons towards the industry military complex.

A coalition for the common goods can only emerge by situating itself immediately at the European² as well as at the National levels. If it emerges, it can bring together not only most of the left and the political ecologists, but also significant parts of the political liberals, and those republican and social christians who have the new neo-conservative right in horror.

² Note from translation; the reference to the European level was intended for European audiences, and is, of course, not limitative towards the global level.