

3 - All in Common: A New/Old Slogan for International Labour and Labour Internationalism (2003)

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The problem of the commons now extends to cyberspace. Photo credit:
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The 18th Century

*They hang the man and flog the woman
That steal the goose from off the common,
But let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose.*
(English folk poem, circa 1764)

The Long 19th Century

[T]he proletariat, the great class embracing all the producers of civilised nation[s], the class which in freeing itself will free humanity from servile toil and will make of the human animal a free being - the proletariat, betraying its instincts, despising its historic mission, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work. Rude and terrible has been its punishment. All its individual and social woes are born of its passion for work.
(Paul Lafargue 1893)

Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,' we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wage system.' It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organised, not only for everyday struggle with the capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organising industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.
(Preamble to the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1905)

The Late-20th/Early-21st Century

Regular IFI [International Financial Institutions] consultations with Global Unions create an opportunity for effective change.

In the past year, Global Unions delegations have participated in exchanges on trade union involvement in PRSPs [Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers] and on the impact of privatisation on labour and found them to be useful... Working women and men are interested in many of the objectives that the IFIs [International Financial Institutions] state as being theirs, ranging from increased jobs that offer better security and working conditions, to higher incomes, improved social protection and quality public services. Unions will only support IFI policies if they make such improvements a reality.
(Global Unions 2002)

The expanded application of the principle of the common heritage of humankind shows the potential of this concept... Against capitalist expansionism, it proposes the idea of sustainable development; against private property and national appropriation, the idea of shared resource management, rational use and transmission to future generations; against nation-state sovereignty, the idea of trust, management by the international community...; against the hubris of the pursuit of power that so often leads to war, the idea of peaceful use; against the political economy of the modern world system, the idea of equitable redistribution of the world's wealth...'
(Boaventura de Sousa Santos 1995: 371-2).

[A]ready fragile prior to Enron, the legitimacy of global capitalism as the dominant system of production, distribution, and exchange will be eroded even further, even in the heartland of the system. During the halcyon days of the so-called New Economy in 2000, a Business Week survey found that 72 per cent of Americans felt that corporations had too much power over their lives. That figure is likely to be much higher now.

(Walden Bello 2002)

Despite all the attempts at privatization, it turns out that there are some things that don't want to be owned. Music, water, seeds, electricity, ideas—they keep bursting out of the confines erected around them. They have a natural resistance to enclosure, a tendency to escape, to cross-pollinate, to flow through fences, and flee out open windows.

(Naomi Klein 2002)

Introduction: back to the future?

The death of international labour's old utopias (Communist, Social-Democratic, Radical-Nationalist - even Business Unionist?) leaves the international trade union movement bereft of much more than a defensive agenda which it still believes can and must be achieved *in partnership* with capital and state. In so far as labour adopts defensive or even *militant oppositional* stances, these still leave it dependent on the practices and discourses of a dynamically-expanding, globalised and networked capitalism. This repeatedly penetrates labour's defences, shifts the goalposts, even abandons football and the football field for computer games and cyberspace. Speaking in the name of evidently unconsulted 'working women and men', the recently re-branded Global Unions (see above) prioritise recognition by, and collaboration with, the enemy - the International Financial Institutions - over any other political aim, any other historical tradition, any other ethical principle, any alternative imaginable end. And, as far as I can see, over any measurable positive impact.

Labour needs a new ethic, vision and strategy that will not only undergird such defensive and limited actions as unions *must* take, but also enable them to act autonomously and to go on the political and moral *offensive* against aggressive global capital and the collusive inter/state instances and regimes. And then, of course, labour needs to increasingly appeal to and articulate itself with the new 'global justice and solidarity movements' that recognise an enemy when they see one and reject collaboration with such.

Slogans and banners matter.

A new labour internationalism needs to go both way back for inspiration and way forward in address. The democratic and secular trinity of the French Revolution,

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

is still valid but needs updating and specifying (*Fraternity*, obviously, as *Solidarity*). The Wobblies' slogan

Abolition of the Wage System

and related workerist/antiwork slogans, need marrying with relevant demands coming from *other* radical-democratic communities and identities. And they need specification

of what follows 'abolition'. The 50-year-old slogan of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions,

Bread, Peace and Freedom

forgets equality and solidarity, and still bears the burden of a Cold War interpretation of 'Free Trade Unionism'.¹ Whilst the ICFTU and its associates have been re-branding themselves as Global Unions they have left their traditional slogan untouched. A discussion on *this*, involving working people and their allies, might help create an international labour movement fit for both immediate defence and eventual re-assertion in the 21st century. Some might like to see a slogan combining

***Equality,
Solidarity,
Democracy,
Useful Production,
Sustainability,
Peace,
Pluralism
...?***

Each of these is today part of the meaning of the others. But I propose to prioritise, at least for discussion, this egalitarian slogan,

Omnia Sint Communia
(All in Common)

Egalitarianism (called, under Communist regimes, 'petty-bourgeois egalitarianism') also needs a re-specification. It could draw on radical-democratic labour and popular tradition (see the first quotes above), and should look forward beyond capitalist globalisation, beyond *capitalism* (as implied in some of the later quotes above). I suggest re-interpreting equality in terms of the old/new principle of *the commons*. This is an old space of sharing, subsistence and rights, a new space for popular encroachment on 1) a capitalism gone cancerous and of 2) inter/state regimes that are complicit with this and/or ineffective (Branford and Rocha 2002).

Appropriately, today, the commons are understood as simultaneously local, national, regional, global and extra-terrestrial. The sky here is not the limit. The tension between the capitalist political-economy (the state-capital, hierarchy-competition, power-exploitation syndrome) and the commons clearly now includes, alongside the oceans and the sea-bed, the electro-magnetic spectrum and cyberspace (CivSoc/CPSR website; Barbrook 2002). These provide an infinite terrain for disputation and, whilst capital and state have the economic, technical, institutional, legal and administrative means for their domination, the political and ethical principles of the hegemon are being increasingly exposed as both rigid and threadbare.

Labour - national and international, North and South, East and West - *is* now increasingly confronting the privatisation of everything (Martin 1993, 2002, Public Services International Research Unit website). The unions find themselves, in these often local, momentary or partial struggles, in alliance with urban dwellers, women's movements, schoolteachers and parents, agricultural producers, indigenous peoples,

¹ Oh dear! The International Trade Union Confederation, which merged late-2006, seems to have avoided controversy by having no slogan at all!

the ecological and/or consumer movements, with gays, progressive professionals and technicians, with democratic cultural and communication activists. The struggle to defend *and extend* the commons, can combine these possible minorities into hypothetical majorities. It would obviously empower the labour movement if such separate, disparate, momentary, partial movements could be systematically linked by a political and ethical principle which has the function and appeal once provided by Communism, Anarchism, Social-Democracy, or Radical-Nationalism. These national-industrial socialisms/radicalisms can now be seen to have been premature, simplifying, reductionist, universalistic - and utopian in the negative sense. Utopia, however, becomes less futuristic, more familiar, if and when we recognise that capitalism is not a unitary object but a complex and contradictory one, which does not - even under globalisation - occupy all social space (Gibson-Graham 1996).

Below I will discuss the relationship between labour and the commons primarily at the international/global level - remembering, of course, that 'global' also means *holistic*, and that any place, space or level must today be understood in a dialectical/dialogical relation with others. But I want to start with that which the international labour movement has so evidently *lost*, largely reducing itself to the role of 'town mayor in wartime' (a somewhat pejorative Dutch reference to collaborating officials under the Nazi occupation), to defensive battles that have to be continually re-fought so as to prevent further retreat, or to the repetition of archaic-romantic revolutionary-apocalyptic dogma. I want to start with Utopia, and for two reasons:

1) because

The Future Is Not What It Used To Be
(graffito cited Sousa Santos 1995:479)

and 2) because

***A map of the world that does not include Utopia
is not even worth glancing at***
(Oscar Wilde).

Indeed, these two slogans could well accompany *Omnia Sint Communia* on the road to

Utopia

which is actually a very nice word indeed since it means both 'nowhere' and 'good place'. It is, in other words, a desirable place that does not (yet?) exist. Utopia has occupied an ambiguous position in the labour movement, ever since Marx and Engels replaced 'utopian socialism' by 'scientific socialism', whilst proposing Communism (which they hardly specified) as its necessary, desirable, inevitable alternative. With the disappearance of 'labour's utopias' (Beilharz 1992), labour internationally has lost most of its capacity to think beyond the shrinking horizons imposed on it by capitalism's expanding ones. Yet, as globalised cultural industries become increasingly central to capitalism, and increasingly occupy the 'free time' of consumers, so must the struggle to 'emancipate ourselves from mental slavery'. Here we could certainly begin with those socialists who already recognised this (Frankel 1987) or are belatedly doing so (Panitch and Leys 2000). The latter (discussed Waterman 2000), summarise their utopia thus:

1. Overcoming alienation;
2. Attenuating the division of labour;
3. Transforming consumption;

4. Alternative ways of living [the feminist one];
5. Socialising markets;
6. Planning ecologically;
7. Internationalising equality;
8. Communicating democratically;
9. Realising democracy;
10. *Omnia sint communia*

Before considering the last of these (to which I am evidently indebted), we need to recognise the position under capitalist globalisation of

Labour

for whom it has meant, simultaneously, the worldwide generalization and intensification of proletarianisation (loss of pre- or non-capitalist means of production) and the dramatic and repeated de-/re-structuring of 'labour for capital' worldwide. Labour (as wage work, as class identity, in the trade-union form, as a significant partner in capitalist industrial relations, as a part of capitalist civil society) is in profound crisis. This requires – even for defence of the traditional unionised working class – a re-invention of the labour movement, including

1. recognition, as the subject of the labour movement, of all forms of labour for capital, waged or not;
2. developing an international labour rights movement worldwide, inspired not by religious or liberal principles of 'fairness', but by the necessity, first, of 'taking labour out of competition', secondly surpassing the wage-labour system;
3. the struggle for free time against enforced work (time also freed from commoditised entertainment and leisure industries);
4. working out and struggling for guaranteed basic income inter/nationally (i.e. income regardless of 'work for capitalism');
5. development of the 'solidarity economy' and 'solidarity economics';
6. development of a 'new social unionism', implying networking between:
 - movements of distinct kinds of labourer;
 - labour and other radical-democratic social movements (women, peace, culture/communication, ecology, human rights);
 - traditional and high-tech or intermediate technical/managerial sectors;
 - *struggles against* the wage-labour system with *struggles for* the resources and spaces for the support of life.

The last of these returns us to

The commons

the experience of which has been universal amongst the poor as they have been confronted by, and resisted the imposition of, first, seigniorial/colonial types of enclosure, then the full capitalist onslaught - clock-time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism (Thompson 1974). Despite centuries of encroachment by capital and state (a nationalistic, elitist, bureaucratic surrogate for a 'universal people' that could have at those times only a notional existence), and despite the seductions of consumer capitalism, popular imagination can still be stirred both by the memory of the commons,

and by contemporary expressions of resistance to such encroachment (indigenous peoples' movements). The revival of the notion of the commons, under globalization, comes from at least two, inter-connected, directions:

1. decades of struggle by the environmental and related movements (often of middle-class origin) for defence or extension of the commons (in terms of space and resources, whether local, national, regional, global, whether subterranean, extra-terrestrial, cyberspatial);
2. increasing popular struggles (of labour, urban, rural, indigenous and other such communities) against the increasing aggression, despoliation and depredation of neo-liberal capitalist privatization, concentration, speculation and corruption. And increasing socialist discussion of such.

Much of the first type of struggle, 'for the common heritage of humankind' (CHH), may take legalistic or bureaucratic forms. Labour/popular struggles may also still be expressed as resistance, opposition and a return to a golden (even tarnished) past of state-control. Yet discourses of the commons - and a consequent extension of all possible radical-democratic alternatives to ownership/control by capital/state - could strengthen traditional labour demands and enrich those of middle-class professionals, technicians and others.

The principle of the commons is subversive of the principles underlying 1) the modern nation-state (actually the state-defined nation) and 2) corporate capitalism. The *state-nation* depends on the principle of sovereignty, which implies state hegemony within geographical borders (and inter-state relations beyond these). It defines the human-being as a national, either as lowest common denominator or as highest common factor. Underlying corporate capitalism is the principle of private property (privatised consumption, privatised services) which, as extended to the human-being sees him/her as both individualised and property-owning - the 'political theory of possessive individualism' (Macpherson 1962). In its extreme contemporary forms, it turns even the national citizen into a cosmopolitan consumer, and literally brands this consumer with a corporate logo (Klein 2000). So extreme - so world-embracing and world-consuming - have become the old contradictions between production and consumption, the worker as producer and the worker as consumer, producing regions and consuming regions, that the movements around/against labour and consumption - even fashion/aesthetics - are now converging (Ross 1999). One US-based international solidarity movement is now producing its own anti-sweat (non-capitalist? post-capitalist?) sports clothes (No Sweat website).

My plea for the international labour movement to join its voice to both the discourse and the struggles concerning CHH, is intended to both broaden the horizons and the appeal of the former, and to give the latter an articulation with class/popular/democratic interests and identities that it might otherwise lack.

Broadening international labour's horizons and appeal. Where, at present, the international trade union movement does fight privatization, this is, customarily, in terms of harm-reduction or benefit-increase. Whilst reference may be made, on the one hand, to the damage done by corporate globalisation/privatization, and, on the other hand, to a 'social interest' or 'social aspect', no challenge of principle is made to those of capital accumulation or state sovereignty. And, whilst I am unfamiliar with the full range of positions taken by the unions concerning 'the common heritage', it is customary for the international ones to tail-end projects of progressive technocrats and bureaucrats, and propose 'social partnership' solutions to problems that its 'partners' have created ('Trade Unions OK...' 1998; Unicorn Website).

Giving 'the common heritage' a class and popular colour. In so far as it has origins in the weaker Third World, during the Cold War, the CHH has always contained a subversive potential. The notion has many elements, including: non-appropriation, management by all peoples, international sharing of benefits, peaceful use, conservation for the future. It refers to an expanding range of overlapping areas and terrains of dispute: the oceans (surface and floor); the Antarctic; cultural artifacts and exceptional urban and natural sites; energy; food; science and technology; space, the atmosphere, the electro-magnetic spectrum, telecommunications, the Internet; genetic resources (Chemillier-Gendreau 2002; Souza Santos 1995). Given the statist origin of the CHH, we should not be surprised that defining and empowering the 'community' - to which this past, present and future heritage might belong - is problematic. Particularly when the community of states (the hegemonically-defined 'international community'), is confronted by rich, powerful and - above all dynamic - corporations with which such states have been historically conjoined. Chemillier-Gendreau says the community to which this heritage belongs has to be invented, in terms of both its identity and its powers (which can include trusteeship alongside ownership). Her notion of a future 'people of peoples' echoes the Zapatista one of a 'world that contains many worlds', or the 'community of communities' of De Angelis (2001). At the level of principles, here, there is a pluralistic idea of overlapping communities/sovereignties. And, at least implicitly, of multiple socio-political levels, of places (geographic), spaces (socio-cultural), that exist in a dialectical and dialogical relationship with each other. Such a notion of community does not assume harmony, it simply invites us to *enclose*, and even *foreclose* on, the major sources of *disharmony* - capitalist accumulation and state hierarchy. But even if this is agreed, we still need to confront the problem of

Linking labour and the commons internationally

Whatever the history, the memory or even the desire, we have to recognise the distance that today exists between labour struggles and those around the commons, nationally and internationally. It would be easy to blame this on any half-dozen of the socialist's hand-me-down Others: the 'labour bureaucracy'; 'trade union reformism', the 'labour aristocracy', the 'Northern unions', 'trade union imperialism'. However, as US cartoon character, Pogo, once so notably said, 'I have seen the enemy and he is us'. Working classes (no less than myself and my readers) have been profoundly socialised into not only working for wages but also privatised consumption, passive and vicarious entertainment, and the notion that freedom consists of choice between competing political elites, competing TV channels and annually-outdated audio-visual equipment. These desires are by no means confined to working classes that can presently afford such. They dangle in front of those who can only hope to obtain them by 'proletarian shopping', riot and theft. This is nothing to be afraid of, though it is something we should feel challenged by. We have to be able to offer models of private and social consumption that are more attractive and more achievable as well as more sustainable.

Where we do find the linkage between labour and the commons being made (implicitly more often than explicitly) may be mostly at the margins. This means at the margins of the trade union organizations (campaigns for defence/extension of social services; where unionists are sacked and/or denied wage labour; where the form of relationship to capital is most ambiguous); margins of the labour movement (amongst libertarian socialists, or those working in or on cooperatives, the social economy, solidarity economies), margins of the state-nation (indigenous peoples, rural labourers, the urban poor); margins of the capitalist world system (the national economies worst affected by unemployment).

It would be to repeat a long-standing error to divide up such initiatives and ideas into 'reformist/palliative' and 'revolutionary/emancipatory', particularly if the one is identified with virtue, the other with vice. This would be to understand these struggles and strategies ideologically (consistent with a theory/party/thinker claiming to embody truth) rather than in terms of self-education and self-empowerment (in which self-activating subjects demonstrate or determine outcomes). The relationship between reformism-within and emancipation-from, like that between labour and the commons, can and must today be understood in terms of experiment, critical self-reflection, dialectic and dialogue. Such an understanding also means that the recovery or re-invention of the commons does not depend on one world area, one type of worker, one type of organization (the trade union, the labour or socialist party, the vanguard network).

In-conclusion

This paper, like any set of initial reflections, raises as many questions as it answers (more answers may be suggested by the resources below). But they seem to me as good a way as any to start a global dialogue.

What, for example, does or should *omnia sint communia* actually mean? Which community? Ownership, usufruct, access, trusteeship?

How would we meaningfully *internationalise* equality?

All in common (my bicycle chain as well as my chains)?

What are we to call this new Utopia, if not Communism? Commonism? Commonerism? It cannot be called Communism any more, or not at present. That was a utopia of the national-industrial-capitalist era. Many people and peoples are *alienated* (*pace* Marx and Engels) from 'Communism'. And the effect of its contemporary use - if not the intention of those who still use it - is to isolate them from those many others who are contributing to a reinvention of the commons.

In so far as we are talking of a process as much as a condition, a movement more than a state of affairs, why not call it by the name that preceded national industrial socialism, and call it the New Utopianism? Or the New Social Emancipation?

Maybe *not* the New Utopianism, given the negative connotation in the popular mind.

Maybe the New Social Emancipation, which contains historical and even contemporary echoes of movements against slavery (including the waged kind), racial discrimination and patriarchy?

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- Creating Living Alternatives to Wage Slavery
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- Creative Commons. <http://www.creativecommons.org/>
- Disenchanted Workers Union. <http://cat.tao.ca/dwu/index.html>
- FutureWork. <http://www.fes.uwaterloo.ca/Research/FW/>
- Internet Democracy Project. <http://www.internetdemocracyproject.org/>
- No Sweat 100% Union-Made Apparel. <http://nosweatapparel.com/sources/>
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- Reinventing Social Emancipation <http://www.ces.fe.uc.pt/emancipa/en/>
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- The Commoner: A Web Journal for Other Values. <http://www.commoner.org.uk/>
- Work Questions. <http://members.aon.at/ro.neunteufel/work.htm#->>
- Unicorn: A Global Unions Anti-Corruption Network/La Red Sindical Global Anticorrupción.
corruption@psiru.org, <http://www.psiru.org/corruption/indexnew.asp>