Abstracting the Commons?

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Érik Bordeleau slightly shifts the ground for the *Common Conflic*t *[onlineopen.org/common-conflict]* virtual roundtable. Seeing as the main challenge is how to envisage and *feel* our being-in-common, he argues that the commonist question par excellence is whether or not to abstract the commons: Does the *-ism* in communism or commonism elevate the commons to a higher and more enduring power, or does this universalization of particular instances of commoning hinder their capacity to affect?

The contemporary geopolitical imaginary is in flames. Amidst the multiplication of protests and uprisings in recent years around the globe, we have come to realize that the word 'crisis' no longer refers to a critical moment of transformation so much as it denotes our ongoing everyday situation. Worse still, it has become an explicit component of political management, informing new strategies of governance of the current global disaster. In consequence, a growing number of people are experiencing feelings of isolation and powerlessness generated by the neoliberal onslaught. As the work of Melanie Gilligan (*Popular Unrest*, 2010) and that of many other artists and thinkers has made abundantly clear, one of the main challenges we now face is to envisage anew our being-in-common or being-with, and the problem of collective organization that comes with it. [1]

For in our universal schizophrenia, we need to invent new ways of entering the milieus we inhabit. We need subtler outsides, better shared zones of opacity so the abysses over which our daytime worlds are erected can be bridged. From the depths of our precarious souls, we need to relearn the art of attuning our thoughts and actions in order to avoid their capture by the ever finer segmentation of markets. We need to reclaim the elusive and transindividual reality of our inclinations and desires, to prevent them from being algorithmically converted into the dark matter of capitalism. All in all, we need to make of ourselves the precursors of a new type of communism: a more-than-human communism based on sensible resonance, rather than a voluntarist and productivist version of it.

I'm drawing here on a few thoughts outlined in my book *Comment sauver le commun du communisme*? (2014) about the political and aesthetical situation of abstractions with regard to the politics of the commons. [2] The French title of the essay suggests a rather unsettling ambiguity: it can either be translated as 'how to save the common of communism?' or 'how to save the common *from* communism?' In other words, paraphrasing Derrida's interrogation about religion that commences *Faith and Knowledge*: Is communism an abstraction that saves or an abstraction to be saved from?

Or again: Is the *-ism* in communism elevating the commons to a higher and more enduring power, or is it instead hindering its cosmopolitical and lived vibrancy? Abstracting or not abstracting the commons, that is the question. We know all too well about how the revolutionary attempts at producing/extracting a new man out of the decadent bourgeois world have ended up proving 'actually existing socialism' to be an

undesirable molar machine. The commonist consensus would then largely seem to be: the commons to come aren't meant to be (universally) abstracted, they shall be situated and transversally felt. [3]

Two recently published books present compelling versions of a radically anti-representational conception of politics that contribute, in no small extent, to the renewal of a commonist politics for our times. Each of them insists, in its own way, on a form of fugitive and affective experience of 'wild commons' that are all about rhythms and resonances and that escape all forms of privative appropriation. Coming from the field of Black Studies, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013) offers a passionate and poetical critique of neoliberal governance that intersects in numerous ways with *To Our Friends* (2014), the Invisible Committee's last opus *[onlineopen.org/who-you-are-is-but-a-manner-of-war]*. [4] Refusing a conception of emancipation primarily based on self-consciousness and auto-reflexivity, these two essays rather take ground in that 'trance that's under and around us' to develop a politics based on the arts of immanent attention and the powers of collective improvisation. They both rely on a strong conception of the 'call' and attune to the idea that: 'Organizing has never meant affiliation with the same organization. Organizing is acting in accordance to a common perception of the situation, at whatever level that may be.' [5] All too briefly put, the 'prophetic organization of the Undercommons' that is alluded to by Harney and Moten resonates closely with the idea, formulated both by Giorgio Agamben and the Invisible Committee, that only a form of life can constitute itself as a truly *destituent* power. [6]

The 'ongoing experiment with the informal' and 'the futurial presence of the forms of life' foregrounded by both essays can read as an attempt to answer the difficult question formulated by McKenzie Wark about the Occupy Wall Street movement: *How to occupy an abstraction*? [7] There is no easy answer to the question of how to resist the financial abstractions commanding our lives at a distance by isolating us in the restrictive form of *homo oeconomicus*, the privatized entrepreneur of oneself and self-promoting subject of interests. The transindividual communism I'm hinting at articulates around the capacity to affect and to be affected. It involves a strong conception of *hapticality*, defined as the capacity to feel through others. This 'touch of the Undercommons' can be declined in many different ways; they vary greatly with regard to how they conceive of the power of abstractions. Grounded in a post-Heideggerian grammar of being, the Invisible Committee's approach, for example, is quite hostile to the language of valorization and abstraction. Writing 'to our friends' means for them to address those 'who aren't attempting to shed what they are and where they are and project themselves onto the abstract terrain of politics – that desert.' [8] This territorializing gesture is, I would argue, a defining trait of recent autonomist French politics. In *En finir avec le capitalisme thérapeutique*, militant and social psychologist Josep Rafanell I Orra also makes a similar claim, stating that political forces always emerge from the belonging to a community and that, as such, 'politics always surges where *situated* experiences are opposing themselves to the abstractions of power.' [9] Conceived along these lines, communism constitutes an immediating power of therapeutic contagion that is able to recharge social bonds at an infra-individual and affective level.

In the guise of a conclusion, I would like to ask two simple yet crucial questions: What exactly does it mean to abstract oneself from a situation? And in what way does that differ (or not) from the possibility of experimenting lived abstractions (say through art)? No doubt, the Invisible Committee's proposition to foster a destituent plane of perception could be said abstractive in its own kind, although not speculative in spirit. But there exist many other ways of conceiving, in more openly affirmative terms, the relation between life and modes of abstraction toward a post-capitalist future. I'm thinking, for example, of approaches drawing on the work of Alfred N. Whitehead, like Bruno Latour's and Isabelle Stengers's cosmopolitics, or the politics of affect understood as ongoing immediation of

the social outlined in the work of Brian Massumi, Erin Manning and the SenseLab. But for the sake of a more direct contrast, one could refer to the work of people who have gathered around the polemical banner of (neo)accelerationism. In his short article 'The Politics of Abstraction: Beyond the Opposition of Knowledge and Life,' Matteo Pasquinelli develops a quite stimulating perspective on what he conceives of as a fetishization of the 'living' within the horizon of autonomist and antagonist politics. In connection with what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have disparagingly called 'folk politics,'[10] Pasquinelli's revalorization of speculative abstractions runs counter to what is often invested in the reference to the commons: 'In this sense, politics should not concern itself with trying to retrieve more body, more affection, more libido, more desire, etc., but should instead focus on developing the powers of abstraction, that is the ability to differentiate, bifurcate, and perceive things in detail, including our own feelings.'[11]

So let me ask once again: abstracting, or not abstracting the commons? That is no doubt the commonist question...

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Footnotes

1. I'm referring here to the work of the existential communist philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy – among many other sources – for whom the common is what we *are* (in the full ontological acceptation of the verb *to be*) and communism, the sense of the being in common we need to think of.
2. Érik Bordeleau, *Comment sauver le commun du communisme*? (Montréal: Le Quartanier, 2014).
3. The slight yet strategic alteration of the word 'communist' into 'commonist' brought about by the journal *Open!* is most fruitful in my view. Along the same lines, to pragmatically avoid terminological misunderstandings, it is sometimes useful to translate what has traditionally been thought of in terms of 'community' into the Simondonian vocabulary of the transindividual. Less historically overdetermined (and overdetermining) than its counterpart, transindividuality allows to foreground the relational presentness at work in the term community.
4. For a reading of Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2014) that focuses on some of its political, aesthetic and literary stakes, see Érik Bordeleau, 'Who You Are is But a Manner of War: Enunciatory Notes on *To Our Friends*,' *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (3 December 2015).
5. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 17.
6. As a cornerstone of Agamben's last book of the Homo sacer project, *The Use of the Bodies* (2016), the concept of destituent power would require a much deeper discussion. For the sake of the argument made here, I would summarize it as follows: destituent power is a political practice that calls out the contingent dimension and arbitrariness of government actions; it requires a haptic or processual mode of perception, that is, a capacity for 'perceiving a world peopled not with things but with forces, not with subjects but with powers, not with bodies but with bonds.' (*To Our Friends*, 79)
7. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*, 74; see also www.versobooks.com
8. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 228–229.
9. Josep Rafanell i Orra, *En finir avec le capitalisme thérapeutique* (Paris: La découverte, 2011), 287, author's translation.
10. There would be a lot to say about this problematic concept. I agree with Srnicek and Williams that among current radical politics endeavours, the problem of hegemonic scaling-up of struggles is mostly left unattended in favour of more localist and anti-statist concerns [a point also made by Frédéric Lordon in the conclusion of his last book, *Imperium: structures et affects des corps politiques* (2015)]. That being said, folk politics' alleged emphasis on 'temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy' conflates way too many positions. Putting in the same horizontalist basket the self-presentation of moral purity in online (identity) politics together with the Invisible Committee's literary war machine seems rather unproductive. They lack, at the very least, a proper concept of affect that doesn't reduce to the 'personal.'
11. Matteo Pasquinelli, 'The Politics of Abstraction: Beyond the Opposition of Knowledge and Life,' *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*, 1 October 2013, www.onlineopen.org/

Crosslinks

Who You Are Is but a Manner of War: onlineopen.org/who-you-are-is-but-a-manner-of-war
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Tags

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