The Ontologized Commons

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In his contribution to the *Common Conflict* *[onlineopen.org/common-conflict]* virtual roundtable, Joost de Bloois elaborates on his critique of the 'ontologized commons,' arguing that it functions as a cover-up for the absence of effective leftist political action. Furthermore, he asserts that focusing on the commons and the practice of commoning – in art as elsewhere – in fact plays into the neoliberal dismantling of public institutions and infrastructure.

Whether it is the work of Antonio Negri, or his fiercest critics such as the Invisible Committee, or more outspokenly philosophical approaches to 'being-in-common' (i.e., Jean-Luc Nancy and Judith Butler), it seems to me that there is always a tendency, and in the case of Nancy et al., the intention, to 'ontologize' the commons. In fact, in the current debates concerning the commons, 'being-in-common' and the commons as a political practice (or even a political concept) appear to be inextricably bound. As if, somehow, the 'ontological commons' serve as the *archè* – the ontological grounding, or even safeguard – of the political use and practice of the commons, or 'commoning.' Commoning thus becomes the activity that confirms, and is even necessitated by, the commons as a state of being, to the extent that 'commoning' becomes the original political gesture: a politics that taps directly into (biological) existence itself ('commoning' becomes the form that life itself adopts). This ontological side of the commons evokes a specific constellation that consists of early Marx (the commons as our *Gattungswesen* or 'species-being'), Heidegger's *Mitsein* or 'being-with,' Foucauldian biopolitics, Agambenian 'forms-of-life' and Deleuzian vitalism.

For example, in a key passage of *The Coming Insurrection*, the Invisible Committee cites the Reebok ad 'I Am What I Am' to illustrate the political ontology of neoliberal capitalism: 'I Am What I Am' commands us to be exclusively ourselves as atomized, subjectified individuals. To this, the Invisible Committee then opposes its own counter-ontology – not of separation and isolation, but of 'being-between' and 'being-in-common' – which will serve as the fundament for their politics. Or better still, what they end up proposing is a politicization of being itself: living existence itself will always have been a form of communing. 'What am I?' they ask. 'Everything that attaches me to the world, all the links that constitute me, all the forces that compose me don't form an identity, a thing displayable on cue, but a singular, shared, living existence, from which emerges – at certain times and places – that being which says "I"' [1] Being equals sharing, being entangled, being in common. Even in Tiqqun's appraisal of the 'ethics of civil war,' we find a similar assertion: being is always relational, even if this means that these relations are relations of enmity, discordant attachments. [2]

The ontological commons posit an originary 'being-in-common': being-with-a-capital and life itself as fundamentally relational, as collectively shaped forms-of-life, as fundamental exposure or vulnerability. In any case, 'common' here becomes (quasi-)synonymous with 'being.' It is this ontologized notion of the commons that is then taken as a matrix for the political practice of commoning. There are obvious dangers to this: the ontologized commons become a placeholder of sorts for actual practices of commoning, as in Negri's

insistence on the 'ontological leap' that the multitude needs to take to seize itself as multitude. [3] We then end up with a 'purified' vocabulary that obscures the prosaic reality of the intended practices of commoning, as becomes manifest in the Invisible Committee's reliance on vitalistic metaphors to imagine a political practice that is totally mundane (organic farming) and has many failed antecedents (autonomism, the imagery of the urban guerilla).

With these cases, we see how the ontologized commons supposedly make up for the de facto absence or marginality of practices of commoning. In this sense, ontologizing or essentializing the commons is not so much tantamount to depoliticization as it is to a wishful 'overpoliticization' of being: the political is delegated to the realm of the ontological, as a means of compensating for the absence of effective political practice. Being and life itself are politicized and in fact end up incarnating the political program of the commons (being together, working together, sharing, enjoying, etc.). The fact of being becomes the *ersatz* for political facts: this leads to a politics that is exempt from any historical responsibility and self-reflection (or rather: it's the excess of self-reflection that leads to seeking refuge in ontology). What this leads to, is a perverse logic (that we also see in a different kind of political ontology such as that of Alain Badiou); politically speaking, we are but a small minority, the remainder of the failed project of emancipation, but ontologically speaking we have always been right. No small comfort, but simultaneously a fabulous obstacle to any effective politics. This is not to say that 'commoning' should exclusively resort to pragmatism – ontological issues remain absolutely vital to reformulating politics today – but that ontology should not become the last (or first) resort of politics, thereby running the risk of turning the latter into empty gesturing, however tempting that may be intellectually. The tacit complicity of the resurgence of the commons with the withering of the public sector is a good illustration of how the ontological commons function as an ersatz. To focus on being-in-common, to a large extent, means to turn your back on the struggle over the public domain (the state and its institutions, the welfare state, participatory citizenship, etc.). To a certain degree this goes for initiatives of commoning as well: the struggle over the *public* good has already been given up, if only because its imaginary has been replaced by that of the *common* good. The obvious risk here is that thinking and practicing 'the commons' perfectly fits the neoliberal agenda, that is to say the neoliberal attempt to appropriate the state in order to all the more effectively dismantle its public institutions (i.e., universally accessible healthcare, education and ultimately the welfare state as such). In the case of the art world, there is a cruel irony here: it is precisely those institutions whose lifeline is the state – mid-sized spaces for experimental, ostentatiously contemporary art – that are promoting the commons (through projects on 'autonomous living,' self-sustaining biotopias, time banks, etc.); is their commonist dreaming of the withering away of the state anything but a suicidal fantasy?

The neoliberal project is first and foremost an attack on the project of political modernity, an attack on the very idea of emancipation and the institutions that guarantee the preconditions, if only minimally, for (social, cultural and political) emancipation: the university, healthcare, social services, arts and culture. In a sense, our moment is a repetition and intensification of the late 1970s/1980s: we are witnessing the dismantling of public institutions, partly because neoliberalism does not want them, partly because neoliberal capitalism (with its burgeoning financial sector) simply no longer needs the institutions of bourgeois society (including the institutions of the art world, or the university) – at least, not in their *public* form: neoliberalism only allows for private institutions to exist (private insofar as they exist in the service of maximized capital accumulation). Neoliberalism is profoundly anti-egalitarian; it is essentially an anti-universalism and therefore an anti-humanism. In the context of the (near-)hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, 'the commons,' despite good intentions, appear only to reinforce the neoliberal agenda (obviously, without sharing it).

Currently, as a practice and political philosophy, 'commonism' is marginal: at best, it can hope to create a 'shadow economy.' I find this highly problematic: a shadow economy is parasitical, secondary and keeps the 'official' economy, and all of its economic violence, social exclusion and political pathologies (such as populism) perfectly intact. To be frank, I also do not see how commonism will become a viable alternative to the neoliberal hegemony: Is commonism capable of generating a critical mass that would be able to face neoliberalism head-on? I fear commonism may prove to be a euphemism for giving up on the modern public domain and the emancipatory project that gave birth to it. For now, in practice, commonism remains inscribed in the growing socio-economic inequality under neoliberalism; the majority of practices of commoning remain accessible only to very specific segments of society, the art world in particular. In that sense, they exclude rather than include and tend to confirm existing disparities between the art world and an increasingly precarized population, and within the art world between young, precarious artists and curators and state-employed art officials. What is especially problematic in this context, is that 'commonism' presupposes that the effects of increasing neoliberalization and precarization are somehow shared (between, say, an increasingly casual workforce and the precarious segments of the art world). I doubt whether precarity can be seen as the great equalizer in this manner. If anything, the neoliberal project of privatization, generalized competition and precarization erects ever-increasing barriers between segments of society struggling over scarce resources. The effect, more likely, is the reinforcement of existing socio-cultural divides: practices of commoning in the art world rarely spill over into the world of labour (and unemployment) in general, despite the (perfectly correct) manifold conceptualizations of art-as-(precarious)-labour. In this light, precisely, against the dreams of a politics purified of the state (which, intellectually, may indeed seem attractive), a politics beyond the emancipatory impetus of political modernity (and the assorted assumption of the latter being in ruins anyway), we should not let go too easily of the public good and its main guardian, the state.

As to the question of whether commonist struggles should relate to more general antagonisms and embrace a wider autonomist horizon or that they simply serve as reminders of the bankruptcy of the more 'orthodox' leftist positions, I think that there are several pitfalls here that need to be avoided.

Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the tradition from which 'commonism' heralds, autonomism, has a (well-documented) history that is far from being unproblematic. From Italian operaismo to the Dutch squatters' movement, however sympathetic, these movements were defeated, have imploded, were born in the vacuum left by communist utopia in the first place and never managed to replace the latter as a historical force (however problematic). Why compulsively repeat what already backfired more than once? Sure, dialectical leftism will not be resurrected, but autonomism hasn't been in good shape either for some time now. Commonism-autonomism versus dialectics seems a false opposition to me: a remainder of intra-leftist struggles that perhaps made sense decades ago, but that today are little more than intellectual exercises (whatever: Tiqqun versus Badiou versus Negri versus Žižek).

Secondly, and this ties in with the concerns I expressed earlier regarding 'ontologizing' the commons: commonism seems to hinge on a constellation of metaphors that are all too performative: convergence, resonance, event, etc. These metaphors translate (understandably perhaps) a certain allergy to subjective agency, to universalizing forms of organization, but at the same time play all of their money on (apparently self-directed) processes: struggles converge, lives resonate, events occur. For all their anti-dialecticism, these notions strangely echo the most atavistic dialectical philosophies (of the impersonal dialectical agency of history or nature themselves). Further, this peculiar vocabulary translates an irresolvable tension or paradox in commonism and autonomism: that of bringing together struggles and forms-of-life, while refusing a common banner, trying to

establish a convergence of singularities (the inoperative community, the part of no part, etc.). While perhaps ethically laudable (perhaps!), in the current political context of neoliberal hegemony, this tension can only turn against itself. In this respect, it is telling that, with Tiqqun, we still end up with a gruesome depiction of a sectarian, apocalyptic 'final struggle' between forms-of-life. There is no point in absolutizing deterritorialization: What if there is a territory (the public good) that needs defending?

This doesn't necessarily imply being subjected to some sort of of authoritarian, all-encompassing subjectivity. To a large extent it means acknowledging just how much we owe to the institutions of political modernity (whether it's the art world or academia), not in the least in terms of the forms-of-life these have molded, and what we would like to salvage from these. Lastly, speaking of 'compromised' day-to-day commonist practices makes little sense: if (recent) history teaches us anything, then it is that autonomous/commonist practices always remain asymmetrical in relation to the (neoliberal) capitalist hegemony, and in fact derived from the latter, and therefore always remain 'compromised.' There is no alleged 'pure' commoning, unless as a philosophical folly.

Finally, with regard to the relation between the success of the commons discourse and the aestheticization of the social that Benjamin warned against, I would like to argue that the 'commonist turn' in the art world – and perhaps more generally the 'political turn' of contemporary art – testifies to the fact that, under neoliberal rule, art, as one of the key institutions of bourgeois capitalism and the subsequent project of political modernity, is steadily losing its (central, or at least vital) social and political significance. As part of the public good, art is now subjected to the logic of privatization, is now being lead by the not-so-invisible hand of the market. The more art gets marginalized, the less it receives recognition as a sociopolitical factor, the louder it claims its political credentials. Commonism and the political turn are perhaps best understood as compensatory mechanisms, a work of mourning: the compulsive repetition of something long lost (art's centrality – whether alleged or real – within the project of political modernity). The de facto political impotence of art today makes the aestheticization of the commons and the social inevitable (any politicization of art today ends up being an aestheticization of sorts), the latter only reinforcing the disappearance of art as a significant oppositional force. Perhaps there is no other choice, perhaps commonism is the only form of opposition we may currently dream of, but to acknowledge this, it seems to me, demands a different (slightly less upbeat...) tone, a different vocabulary...

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Footnotes

1. Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 31–32.
2. See Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010).
3. See Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

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Activism, Commons, Public Domain

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