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Communities between Commons and Commodities Subjectivity and Needs in the Definition of New Social Movements¹

The cycle of social movement mobilization that has taken place following the 1999 anti-WTO riots in Seattle, involving struggles and organizational forms on a global scale, has highlighted the central role of local dynamics of confrontation in determining moments of disruption of global capitalist command. As a result, the notion of "community" has gained wide usage to define political strategies, sites of mobilisation and the repository of counter-hegemonic discourses. The level of the community has been, in particular, often celebrated by many "anti-globalisation" theorists² as providing the social framework for, to use Mittelman's appropriate characterisation³, the "infrapolitics" of resistance embedded in "hidden transcript" of the everyday life. It is at this level, that the structure of capitalist domination and oppression allegedly becomes immediately visible for the agency of the subaltern groups and is re-elaborated in patterns of collective construction of meanings that are potentially conducive to subversive forms of social identification. The radicalism expressed in many and diverse contexts on issues such as the privatisation of basic services, the defence of common goods against their commodification, resistance to environmental destruction, the imposition of new forms of gender inequality seems to provide cases to support this argument. Such movements are often characterised by a high level of unpredictability linked to the fact that the immediacy of the issues on which their identities are built challenges the most established path of left politics and organising, the prescription of rigid stages of development of collective consciousness and the existence of institutionalised channels of mediation and negotiation with the state.

Actually, state power and the associated need to be represented at, or to "act" upon, that level is quite often a relatively minor concern for such movements⁴. Direct acts of reappropriation of resources and the definition of radically autonomous societal relations are paths that more usually characterise the development and entrenchment of practices of resistance of this kind. For people living at this level, the intervention of officials from the local municipality that have to execute the eviction of residents that fail to pay for the increased rates of newly-privatised water and electricity utilities are much more indicative of the nexus between state, markets and global capital than sophisticated academic analyses that still emphasize the relevance of the state as a potential barrier against globalisation, which would invite to moderate "extremist" claims and behaviours. The fact that such an "extremism" is, far from being a mere ideological option, deeply intertwined in the extreme form of brutality and deprivation inherent in policies of integral commodification of life carries important implications in clarifying issues surrounding the "community" as a site of resistance to capitalist globalisation. However, to avoid falling into an unproblematic idealisation of the community as a site where pure and authentic identities are forged in the struggle against the impersonal forces of global capital, it is crucial to

¹ This is the edited version of a presentation delivered at the European Social Forum, workshop on *Commons and Communities*, Florence 7-10 November 2002.

² For a recent example, see Naomi Klein (2002), *Fences and Windows* (New York: Picador).

³ James H. Mittelman, *The Globalization Syndrome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 172-175.

⁴ A similar point has been forcefully made in John Holloway (2002), *Change the World without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press).

underline Hardt and Negri's convincing criticism of the concept⁵. Their cautionary note, in particular, warns against the aspects of authoritarianism, exclusivism and imposed homogeneity that necessarily accompany any vision of the "local" community fundamentally defined as mere opposition/resistance to the "global". This latter level, or the "Empire" in their terminology, is not only the product of past, partially successful efforts, to internationalise the anti-capitalist struggle, breaking the boundaries of pre-existing, variously coercive forms of political community (chiefly the nation-state) and of sovereignty built thereupon. More than that, the Empire constitutes the new terrain of struggle where local communities' forms of opposition are required to "project" themselves, while maintaining the specificity of their demands in order to provide an effective response to the present forms of capitalist domination.

From this point of view, the ability of operating such a projection, which fully accepts globalisation as the necessary terrain for the reproduction and circulation of struggles, can be a first, useful approximation towards a definition of "progressive" vis-à-vis "regressive" use of the concept of community. Furthermore, the events that have taken place in Seattle can be looked at under a new light from this perspective. Seattle is not, therefore, as it is often portrayed, the act of birth of a "new global movement" where none existed before, which would moreover run counter the fact that important components of such a "globality" as in the case of movements from the South were not materially present in that and many similar events thereafter. Rather, the importance of Seattle consists essentially in having provided new forms of globalised political languages, imagery and symbolic representations for movements that remain predominantly linked to their global dimension. The fact that this new discursive space has been actually utilised in different ways and to different extents by different social movements confirms this definition.

At the same time, an evaluation of the diversified ways in which local community struggles gain new meanings from the existence of a globalised discursive space for social movements seems to indicate a more fruitful line of analysis than trying to define abstract typologies that encase "progressive" and "reactionary" meanings of community. Therefore, the rest of this presentation is primarily concerned with identifying and discussing some factors that can explain why and in which forms "community" becomes a political concept that makes sense within local mobilisations in their connection with global opposition to the Empire. I will, in particular, suggest three forms of projection of community struggles into the global social movement discursive arena. By projection I mean here a process whereby the singularity of the conditions facing specific communities in struggle contains the universality of features that are immediately connected with the logic and dynamics of domination of global capital, defining potential patterns for collective subjectivity formation.

It is important to underline from the start that all these three aspects of local-global projection have to do with a profound dissatisfaction, or at least a sense of indifference, that has been voiced in many of these movements towards established and mainstream left politics. To some extent this echoes the rejection of the state-centred, gender-biased, industrialist framework of Western left parties by social movements emerged between the 1960s and the 1970s from women's struggles, environmental mobilisations and working-class refusal of work. This trajectory of rejection of established left policies has been enriched in the South during the past two decades of collapse of structural adjustment policies by movements that have consciously departed from left experiences that had in the past closely identified themselves with (by now

⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

bankrupt) projects of "national liberation", state-driven developmentalism or strategies based on the centrality of state sovereignty.

A case particularly relevant emerged out of this trajectory is that of South Africa. Here the past five years have seen the beginning and the first attempt at national forms of coordination of various movements active on different issues related to the commodification of basic necessities. Land occupations, struggles against urban evictions, illegal reconnections of water and electricity for "rate defaulters" in privatised utilities are witnessing the emergence of a new style of social opposition that only to a limited extent replicates the strategies of "ungovernability" that anti-apartheid social movements in the 1980s carried forward to further national liberation politics. In fact, the new movements in South Africa would not be understandable apart from the absolutely innovative feature provided by direct reappropriation of resources and the way in which this nurtures a complex texture of social and cultural practices rooted in a strong sense of extra-institutional autonomy. Surely these aspects are far from being unproblematically assumed within the movements, and remains of old oppositional left traditions (mainly orthodox Marxist) with their conventional view of seizure of central power and hierarchical encadrement of the grassroots are still influential and control crucial organisational assets. However the existence of this contrast nonetheless illustrates a widening gap between established left approaches and emerging grassroots practices. This gap is beautifully summarised in Ashwin Desai's important account of new social movements in South Africa:

"There is agreement that while left values are still important to us, the left project often took on forms that became obstacles to realizing those values. This was true at least to the extent that left organizations are based on a mere philosophy of domination that confines social subjects to the role of either passive victims or card-carrying members of the revolutionary party. The left has been unable to recognize the teeming life in between. Life! This is not just a theoretical issue (...). If I was a traditional leftist, I would have to spend all my time first engineering the content of the life of people in these communities so that it accorded with the insights of socialism. That would be the struggle! But this is not the way things are. There is a rich, complex, imperfect, and sensuous collectivity existing in the communities and their needs (...). There are dangers of course. Talk of human rights and citizenship often result in validation of the social order (...). Parochialism too has to be warded off and efforts made to be sensitive to the struggles of other subaltern groups. But there is no doubt for me that whatever the dangers, there would be little civic resistance at all today in South Africa if it was not for expectations of dignity, human rights, and a dignified life".⁶

This argument is conducive to more general conclusions that have a direct relevance on the question of how community movements project their struggles on a global dimension, and of the extent to which the very concept of community can still be a useful tool of analysis in spite of all its limitations. In particular, Desai's analysis encapsulates dynamics of community mobilisation that illustrate the forms of projection of communities into the global social movement arena that I have previously mentioned. These three forms can be summarised as, respectively, the renewed relevance of what Foucault termed "bare life" as a terrain of contestation, the centrality of needs as a factor that defines communities as insurgent practices and projects, and a new approach to subjectivity in relation to the unity of diverse struggles.

⁶ Ashwin Desai (2002), *'We Are the Poors': Community Movements in the New South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

From the first point of view, the emerging global constitution of capitalism and of forms of market-based regulation defines the very conditions for the production and reproduction of life as a central stake in social struggles. The integral commodification of life as a new frontier of capitalist valorization requires a global regulatory regime on property rights and guarantees for private investors that underpins the privatisation of what welfarist and developmentalist social compromises still allowed to some extent to retain in the form of "commons", as in the case of communal land, municipal services, education. At the same time, the commodification of the commons responded to the rigidities imposed on capitalist accumulation by the combined effect of refusal of work in the North and resistance to proletarianisation in the South. In this latter case, in particular, the alternatives for relative surplus-value extraction embodied in strategies of export-orientated industrialisation and increased marketisation of agriculture could not overcome the limitation provided by a reality that saw regular wage labour employing only a declining fraction of the population. The existence of broadening areas of poor, marginalised population was at the same time an economic constraint and a source of social conflicts for local elites in charge with inserting their countries in the global neoliberal order. Commodification of basic necessities, and the imposition of rigid market discipline of "cost-recovery" to determine access in impoverished communities allowed to define the poor entirely outside the rhetoric of citizenship and fully within the realm of consumption. The word "rightsizing", used by South African local policy-makers, adequately captures this strategy of constraining individuals' and communities' access to the elementary means of survival entirely on the basis of their ability to pay for commodified services⁷. At the same time this strategy is highly unstable since, while it allegedly taps into flexible and informal networks of survival, activity and generation of resources, it nonetheless reinforces the condition of deprivation for those who do not have an adequate access to a monetary income, or a wage. The declining significance of the wage in the everyday life strategies of the poor contrasts with a deepening importance of the monetary form in defining life chances. Under changed circumstances, this contradiction resurrects the problem of a radical separation between wage (as monetary reward for the work effort) and income (as the combination of monetary and non-monetary resources required for the satisfaction of needs) that had been at the centre of the whole trajectory of twentieth-century working class struggles against commodification.

The old solution to that separation, provided by various welfare state experiments subsequently defeated by the connection between working class struggles and neoliberal response, is now being radically rethought by capital. The commodification of life and the imposition of a social hierarchy based on access to market resources gradually replaces previous social compromises on which established left ideas of what constitutes "progressive" politics continue to be largely based. At the same time, while eschewing national regulatory deals and corporatist accommodations, these disciplining strategies based on the commodity form privilege the local terrain and the level of social services for the communities as a terrain of implementation and tentative definition of new positive collective attitudes towards the market. At the same time, the very definition of the concept of "community" becomes a terrain of contestation. To those views (widespread in American "communitarian" rhetoric) emphasizing collective responsibility and discipline as the basis of successful "prosperity" (i.e. positioning on the market), the new movements tend to oppose alternative forms of identification based on radical decommodification and reappropriation from below. In this view, the construction of organised forms, demands, even ways to relate to the institutions is premised on practices that implement in the everyday life a rupture of the market paradigm and shift the claim for a

⁷ See David McDonald and John Pape, eds. (2002), *Cost Recovery and the Crisis of Service Delivery in South Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Press).

collective income on a radically different terrain, as exemplified in movements of land occupations, reconnection of disconnected services, resistance to evictions.

Second, and closely linked to the former point, the theme of needs becomes decisive in the definition of the community as a radical political project of decommodification based on insurgent everyday practices. In a context whereby the very preconditions of life are once again thrown in the Marxian "realm of necessity" and market-based individual competition, the existence of common needs whose fulfillment is prevented by their translation into the commodity form is what provides the immediate element of recognition of social antagonism embedded in individual and separate life trajectories. Assuming communities as spaces of needs where antagonist political projects are nurtured ultimately allows social movements to differentiate themselves from "essentialist" understandings of community as based on inherent, pre-existing, a-historical facts (territory, ethnicity, language, etc.). It also allows a redefinition of the meanings of life that becomes highly relevant to sustain political opposition. The enclosure and commodification of the commons defines life in terms of mere biological necessity to be satisfied along the mono-dimensional scale of market-based access to resources. The existence of needs that are diverse and yet determined by general strategies of socio-economic restructuring implemented at the level of whole communities leads to the definition of social relations, spaces of dialogue and cultural practices where this connection takes shape in the interaction of everyday experiences. The theme of political mobilisation becomes therefore inseparable from that of building community as *counterpower*, or life forms that gradually become autonomous from the state and capital⁸.

This notion of community goes back, following a remarkable discussion of the concept provided by Roberto Esposito⁹, to the very origins of the concept. "Community" as based on the combination "cum-munus" recalls the idea of "sharing a gift". However, differently from other meanings of the word that have to do with individual reciprocity or donation, "munus" implies a "gift" that exists only in the public sphere and for collective access. As such it is also closely related to the idea of the "commons" as opposed not so much to "individual" (which participates in the act of sharing) but to "proper" (and to "property") as abdication/alienation from what is common as in the case of market exchange. Therefore, the question of needs becomes particularly relevant in a context of global commodification of life since it allows us to provide the conceptual and political foundations for a specific definition of community as *necessarily* based on a public sphere that is inherent antagonistic towards private appropriation. Antagonism is not here a matter of different ideological discourses through which specific communities are constituted, but it goes at the heart of the inevitably controversial meaning of the very concept of community.

The third, and final, point of this presentation refers to the implications of my definition of political community for the conceptualisation of social subjectivity. The definition I have advanced implies a coexistence of singularity and universality at least at two levels. First, community is a space in which global capitalist strategies become recognisable and intelligible at the specific territorial level that today constitutes their main terrain of implementation. Second, community is a space of needs, counterpower and elaboration of general collective responses and strategies that are based on discursive interactions that start from a plurality of everyday situations. Both forms of relationships between singularity and universality directly contrast with traditional ways of dealing with this issue in mainstream left politics. This latter

⁸ This point has been greatly clarified in discussions held with comrades of the Colectivo Situaciones in Buenos Aires in July 2002.

⁹ Roberto Esposito (2001), *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunita'* (Turin: Einaudi).

was premised on an *ontology* of the revolutionary subject (be it "the people", "the masses", "the nation", "the class") starting from which single experiences and contexts gained sense, meaning and validation, as in the case of the old distinction between "true" and "false" class consciousness. A specialised layer (or vanguard) of cadres and activists was usually in charge of performing this validation on the basis of their being the only repositories of a universal "science" of liberation to which specificities had to accorded and conformed.

Cases as diverse as South Africa, Chiapas, Argentina and social movements in Italy have shown, the development of social antagonism and the production of the highest levels of disruption for capitalist command has often not only taken place independently from those neatly defined trajectories of change, but has generally left their organised proponents in the mainstream left hopelessly behind, for example, defending a mythical role of the state that has been entirely sidestepped by the current features of social confrontation. What those struggles have shown, instead, is a rethinking of social subjectivity not as subsumed under the image of a necessary Subject, but as the encounter of a *multitude* of partialities in search of some forms of commonality. Fragmentation and precariousness have not only been experienced as a condition of powerlessness and marginality totally determined by capitalist domination; they have rather been used as assets to recompose unpredictable configurations of practices of insubordination. The emphasis on *commonality* as opposed to organisationally mediated *unity* has ultimately enabled the full citizenship within the movements of subjects -- such as unemployed, migrants, atypical workers -- whose voice, due to its being excluded by traditional forms of state-based societal bargaining, was either silenced by the official left, or dismissed as based on "lifestyles" or "single issues". Defining community as the repository of a potential commonality of struggles based on the very public nature of needs being commodified acts therefore as a powerful critique of vanguardist forms of left organising. Their search for unity prioritizes not the terrain of material social practices of formation of *subjectivity* but that of representing an ontologically coherent and immanent social *subject*. In order to, to paraphrase Marx, put the movements' feet on the ground rather than on the thin air of ontology, the analysis therefore has to turn towards dynamics of construction of subjectivity that proceed through situational breaks¹⁰, localised points of disruption in which new languages, imagery and common sense creep in as potential and generalisable foundations for societal autonomy. Inhabiting these situations has much more to do with Guattari's concept of "transversality" than with left traditions of "organisation".

Of course, dangers of glorifying localism or turn debates around community into unproblematic conceptualisations of "civil society" that emasculate the inherently conflictual nature of the concept are always present in the attempt of reinterpretation that these pages have tried to advance. However, these are risks worth running for an analysis and a style of political action that wants to put, for once, real-life subjectivity at its centre.

¹⁰ Colectivo Situaciones, *19 y 20. Apuntes sobre el nuevo protagonismo social* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Mano a Mano).