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Reflections on alternatives, commons and communities
or

building a new world from the bottom up[1]

Summary

This piece proposes an argument for the development of a new political discourse based on two main coordinates, commons and communities. Commons suggest alternative, non-commodified means to fulfill social needs, e.g. to obtain social wealth and to organise social production. Commons are necessarily created and sustained by communities, i.e. by social networks of mutual aid, solidarity, and practices of human exchange that are not reduced to the market form. The "place" of these networks does not need to be tied to locality, but communities can operate both in local and through trans-local places. Also, as our movements have shown, communities cannot be separated from the learning practices of direct democracy, horizontality, participation and inclusiveness that are the power to decide what are the goals and modalities of social production. It is argued that the identification of commons and communities as the main strategic horizon for a new political discourse emerge out of the practices of the current transnational movement for global justice and solidarity taken as a whole.

There are two main reasons why it is important to become aware of these practices and turn them into founding elements of a new political discourse. First, because this opens up the space to develop strategic perspectives to win commons and strengthen communities, as they apply in whatever concrete situations. Second, because they make it possible to raise debates

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not only about the aims of the different concrete struggles, but especially how to articulate these aims across different issues and subjects.

1. "Another world is possible": yes, but we need a new political discourse.

The following reflections emerge out of the overlapping between a two lines of enquiry that I have been pursuing in the last few years. One is drawn from what we may call the critical political economy of globalization, that is the study of trends, processes and the strategies of capital over the last "neoliberal" period. The other is drawn from the participation and, therefore, (self) reflection within the constellation of movements forming the global justice and solidarity movement.[2]

This movement has posed the question of a plurality of "alternatives" to the social processes and arrangements that produce the horrors of modern global capital. In order to take the many calls for and practices of alternatives seriously, we have to make them relevant to the real people at the fringe or outside the movement. In other words, we want to move from movement to society not so much by persuading people to "join" our movement, but through a language and a political practice that by tracing the connections between diverse practices attempts to dissolve the distinctions between inside and outside the movement, i.e., actually moves 'from movement to society'. To make the possibility of a new world that contains many worlds an *actuality,* we have to be able to shape our own discourse in such a way as to echo the needs and aspirations coming from below. We have to give coherence to their plurality, without imposing a model or reiterating dead ideologies.

We need a discourse that helps to articulate the many alternatives that spring out of the points of crises of neoliberal capital, which seriously threaten to dispossess people of their livelihood and impose on them new or more intensified commodified patterns of life. We need a discourse that builds on the plurality of the many concrete struggles and their methods and help us to articulate a vision – not a plan – of the whole. Then we can better evaluate what are the global implications of our local struggles, as well as the local implications of global struggles for the building of a world that contains many worlds.

But most of all, we need a discourse that recognizes the power we have to shape alternatives, at every level in society, that sets out from the simple fact that, contrarily to common belief, alternatives do *exist, are* everywhere and plural. To clarify, I think that every social node, that is every individual or network of individuals is a bearer of alternatives. This is evident not only when struggles erupt in any of the waged or unwaged local and trans-local nodes of social production. We just need to look around in the relative normality of daily routines to see that every social node "knows" of different ways to do things within its life-world and sphere of action longs for a different space in which things can be done in different ways. Each social

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[2] I must make clear here that whenever I refer to this movement, I mean a galaxy of practices and subjects, a heterogeneous world-wide multitude that comes together as a movement of movements. The aspirational horizons that emerge out of this movement, embedded for example in its organizational network forms (that carry the principles of horizontality, inclusiveness, participation, democracy) and its broad vision for a world that contains many worlds, are an indication that the practices of the multitude include the practices aimed at transcending itself as multitude.

node expresses needs and aspirations that are the basis of alternatives. For example: the alternative to working 10 hours a day is working 6; the alternative to poverty is access to the means of existence; the alternative to indignity is dignity; the alternative to building that dam and uprooting communities is not building that dam and leaving communities where they are; the alternative to tomatoes going rotten while transported on the back of an old woman for 20 miles is not GM tomatoes that do not rot, but access to land near home, or a home, or a road and a truck.

Since every social node is aware of a spectrum of alternatives, the problem is simply *how* to make these alternatives actual? What resources are needed? How to coordinate alternatives *in such a way that they are not pitted against each other* as is the case of the competitive markets' understanding of alternatives? How to solve the many existing problems without relying on the alienating coordinating mechanism of the market and creating instead social relations of mutual enrichment, dignity, and respect? These are I believe the bottom line questions on which a new political discourse must be based.

Once we acknowledge the *existence* of the galaxy of alternatives as they emerge from concrete needs and aspirations, we can ground today's new political discourse in the thinking and practice of the actualization and the coordination of alternatives, so as each social node and each individual within it has the power to decide and take control over their lives. It is this actualization and this coordination that rescues existing alternatives from the cloud of their invisibility, because alternatives, as with any human product, are social products, and they need to be recognized and *validated* socially. Our political projects must push their way through beyond the existing forms of coordination, beyond the visible fist of the state, beyond the invisible hand of competitive markets, and beyond the hard realities of their interconnections that express themselves in today forms of neoliberal governance, promoting cooperation through competition and community through disempowerment. As I will argue, this new political discourse is based on the project of defending and *extending* the space of commons, *at the same time* building and strengthening communities through the social fields.

2. The need for a new political discourse: an illustration.

To clarify why we need a new discourse, let us take an example illustrating the limitations of current discourses in the face of a very concrete crisis. As recently as last mid-October, the news that FIAT was in trouble hit the headlines of Italian and international newspapers. This was followed by a typical vociferous debate, in which the different positions were outlined.

Very schematically, at the point of the emergence of the crisis, on one side there was the official FIAT line, seeking to sell the lot to GM, with the prospect of closing several plants and turning the plants in Mirafiori into a *maquiladora* factory. On the other side there was the trade union FIOM and Communist Refoundation who, asking for renationalisation, looked forward to large investments, innovation, safeguard of employment and a strong emphasis on research and development. Clearly, if you are a FIAT worker you know which side you are on.

In my lecturers' union in the UK we play this game all the time. We always choose to safeguard jobs and livelihood and rationalize them to the public with stories of regeneration and innovation, even if the implication of our discourse is to accept playing the game of pitting college against college, university against university, teacher against teacher. The point is that from a *broader* political perspective, one that takes the issue of car production in one particular

place within the context of global production of cars and, even more broadly, of competitive market interactions and global warming, *both* of these alternatives are quite problematic for *complementary* reasons. They both represent *different* strategies to survive and indeed, fight for domination in the competitive market, measured by profits, rates of growth and market shares. They both imply a competitive relation to the "other". (Here the other can be understood as Renault workers, BMW workers, Ford workers, etc.). Ultimately, anything that "good management" —— so much hoped for even by the left in the case of FIAT —— can do is will contribute to the bankruptcy of Renault, BMW or Ford workers. Until of course it is their turn to restructure and pose with similar urgency the question of new and innovative strategies.

Not to talk of the fact that, in this endless competitive game, the productive effort wasted on global car production is immense, that transport takes on an increasing individualized form, that CO_2 emissions grow exponentially. Before all this, we will meet again next time in Porto Alegre or anywhere else and again demand a different world. However, we will never make a different world if we are not able to acknowledge the needs, aspirations and demands for dignity of, say, the 200,000 FIAT workers across the world *together with* the needs of different, non-competitive, inclusive relations expressed by our movement, *together with* the many demands for participation and empowerment and control over our lives, *together with* the control over our ecosystems. In other words, we will never make a different world if we are not able to acknowledge all this with a new political discourse that makes sense to a multitude that is searching for ways to build bridges with each others and take control of the aims and forms of social production.

How are we to acknowledge this concretely? I do not know. It depends on the context of concrete situations. However I suspect that by posing the question and replicating it for the many instances of crises of social production and reproduction, we are already on the right track, especially if we frame the questions in terms of commons and communities.

3. The wisdom emerging from the movement . . .

As "coordinates" of a new political discourse, commons and communities can help us organize our thinking and practices of alternatives as enclosures and competitive relations are organizing the thinking of our masters. They are not elements of a fixed ideology, a dogma that we have to subscribe to. They provide both an intellectual and political horizon that we can enrich through our practices and thinking in the context of concretes struggles. Thus, the political discourse I am talking about is one that is not posed from the outside, it is not something that this or that intellectual can "invent" for us all, and then we go out and apply it to our concrete cases. Our new political discourse is one that must acknowledge that the process of creating a new world, as any process of human production, is a praxis, a circular process, from cognition, reflection and imagination to practical intervention in the world making use of some kind of resources, and back to cognition, reflection and imagination. Intellectuals – that is *anybody* who practices the first moment of this loop, *direct action* in the field of thought, communication and reflection – can look at their objects, for example a movement, and distill elements of a discourse. The return of these back to the movement may help the process of a collective self-reflection, coordinate praxis, define strategies and sharpen visions. Then, of course, this will reflect back on the need for direct action in the field of thought, communication and reflection.

Thus my perception is that the aspirations *and* organizational forms that this movement gives itself reveal a field of action grounded upon two main *practices*: the seizure and/or demands for *commons* and the (learning) practice of *communities*. In a nutshell, *commons* suggest alternative, non-commodified means to fulfill social needs, e.g. to obtain social wealth and to organise social production. Commons are necessarily created and sustained by communities, i.e. by social networks of mutual aid, solidarity, and practices of human exchange that are not reduced to the market form. As we will see, the "place" of these networks does not need to be tied to locality. In fact, the many social practices using modern communication technologies create trans-local places in which communities operate to complement local places. Also, as our movements have shown through the organizational forms it practices, communities cannot be separated from the learning practices of direct democracy, horizontality, participation, and inclusiveness. If only we could organize the vast majority of social production along the same principles!

Commons and communities thus represent the two coordinates of a *grounded* vision, that is a vision that emerges out of the *practices* of this movement for global justice and solidarity once this movement is taken as a whole. What does it mean to take this movement as a whole? It means that no matter whether we think that particular positions within it could be politically dangerous, contradictory, naïve, insufficient, "right", "wrong", romantic or idealizing (and each of us make these judgments all the times), the *articulation* of the various practices of the movement is giving rise to something greater than the sum of particular positions. Through a multitude of encounters among different aspirational standpoints rooted in a plurality of struggles, grand narratives about the world or answers to the question of "what is to be done?" are not necessarily getting more coherent. However, two fundamental things are happening.

First, *mutual understanding of subject-positions* within the networks of social production making up the global factory is developing and intensifying. Cross-pollination not just of struggles but also among "life-worlds" and systems of significations, implies that we are remaking ourselves as social subjects with a sensibility towards the "other" which is not just ideological or ethical, but rooted in some experience of communication across life-worlds and subject-positions. Thanks to the struggles of all the invisible people, their refusal to embrace discourses, goals, and worldviews that was not theirs, their rejection of subordination to promises that everything will be OK if only they conformed, we now have to *deal with difference* and we can deal with difference by *exercising the power* of the recognition of "the other" qua dignified and free social subject.

Second, the continuous practice of 'encountering' leads to the consequent "normalization" of the principles of democracy, inclusiveness and horizontality. Those who lament confusion in the movement underestimate the importance of the novel forms through which this confusion is exercised, a creative chaos allowing planting and disseminating seeds of democracy through the social body. The social DNA of a new epoch is *possibly* now emerging, sanctioning a point of no return to forms of politics in which political parties could grant for themselves the knowledge of what *is* the alternative. Alternatives are themselves processes of self-creation of the multitude, and therefore cannot be monopolized by parties or by anybody else. Current parties and political forces, as well as forms of thought still rooted in the belief that they monopolize the true vision of the alternatives (whether "socialism" or any other "ism"), can only try to delay the only inevitable thing: their demise.

These seeds of democracy and conviviality are unstoppable for very simple reasons. The only thing that cannot be fully enclosed is human communication. We are social beings, so how can

we enclose our sociality? At most the means of our sociality such as land, water, food, tools, and so on can be enclosed. And when the space of communication is 6 billion human beings, the possible communicative permutations are . . .out of the range of any pocket calculator. If communication is channeled into certain directions, it will then emerge unpredictably in others. Maybe it can be silenced in certain localities, but it pops up in others.

The first immediate impact of this grounded vision is the identification of the state-market nexus as *the* limit set upon the building of concrete alternatives springing from the grassroots. This nexus that all want to channel, control and discipline in pre-established competitive modes of social interaction expresses the terror of economic, financial and political elites for anything alive and free. In front of this barrier to our freedom to interact and develop local and trans-local communities of social production and mutual aid, this movement is developing instead strategic alternatives which extend new types of commons and strengthen communities.

Also, this grounded vision underlines a tacit (and in the case of Argentina, not so tacit) call for systematic *"removal policies"* to dispose of, bit by bit, all the crap of traditional politics, left or right, socialist or conservative, all forms of hopelessness, of the "there is no alternative" kind or "the alternative begins after we take power". It is a disenchanted wisdom that recognizes the power-seeking and manipulating practices of traditional politics for what they are. It is totally cynical towards testimonial campaigning and brand politics. It is outraged at the politicians' seeming to address needs before a vote and spitting out the emptied shells of bodies after elections. Increasingly, the wisdom emerging is that this is the case not just because individual politicians are corrupted – and, of course, many are – but because the system of global corruption is more powerful than well-intentioned politicians. Thus, the wisdom of this movement is a demand, first of all, for respect!

Does this mean that the movement is demanding withdrawal from engagement with the state? No, it means that it increasingly regards the articulation of our communities as "the state", and the existing state bureaucracy as a nuisance we inherit from another era in which we thought that power was "up there". A nuisance that we have to push back from our lives inch by inch, while at the same time using it to suit our purposes where the articulation of our communities cannot yet reach.

But the opportunities to build communities on the basis of commons are everywhere, whether within the bellies of transnational corporations or outside, in fields or in the streets of our cities. The goals and aspirations of these communities are as diverse as the recognition of union rights with which to fight battles for the reduction of working rhythms and increase in wages, or win individual and communities' access to land, social knowledge, transports health, education, communication and means of existence.

Articulation of communities on the basis of commons means regarding the interactions among individuals and communities as human interactions that give rise to many different kinds of exchanges. These human exchanges on the basis of commons are different from the current market exchanges grounded on enclosures that have come to dominate our lives. This latter form of human exchange, the forms it takes, the concentration of power over resources behind it, and its drive to dominate every other human exchange, make poverty and plenty two sides of the same coin and make us run like rats no matter how much we produce. Scarcity is the ongoing *result* of our competitive participation in this market. The seizure and demands for commons put an end to this by ending the specific "lack" that is its foundation: the artificial lack of access to the plentiful means for producing our existence.

Again, bit by bit, wherever it can reach, this movement seems to identify the lacks that stand in the way of our very concrete empowerments. It points at this or that barrier, at this or that property concentrated in the hand of modern *rentiers*, at this or that accumulation of social wealth detached from its common-sense human purpose, at this or that corporate monopoly over social knowledge. Some sections of the movement at times identify a barrier and decide to overcome it, by seizing property as in the case of the landless brothers and sisters in Brazil, the millions on the internet who defy corporate enclosures of music. Sometimes other extensions of the movement identify needs that are not met, and campaign demanding commons to make it possible to meet them thus releasing resources for social reproduction. This is what we do when we fight for entitlements in health and education, and against privatization. Sometimes there are movements to limit the activities of major transnational corporations, by building barriers to their private cost-minimizing dumping of waste, or exposing for everybody to see their profit-maximizing use of child labour in the sweatshops of the worlds.

However, other times the movement appears unable to reach its object, not even with words, as if paralyzed by the task at hand. Looking at those global production chains, large transnational corporations mobilizing an immense amount of social resources, we try to build our struggles for jobs, working conditions, wages, or for responsible environmental practices, often afraid to think about the broader implications of our struggles when taken as a whole. Thus, we seldom construct political discourses that directly challenge corporate's *property* of the means of existence, almost in fear we could be damned by the wrath of the money-god that rules our lives and makes us relate to each other competitively. We are afraid that the experience of past alternatives — bureaucratic state property which was as exploitative and oppressive as corporate property — demonstrate that maybe actually there is no alternative.

Ultimately however, the movements will have to face this *impasse*. If we keep setting limits to capital *in every sphere of social life*, saying no to war and enclosures, environmental destruction and indignity, growth for growth sake and exploitation, human relations based on competition or despotism, *and if we are effective in doing so*, there will be nothing else left that the beast can feed upon. Capital, that depends on growth for growth's sake, barrier overcoming and colonization of life, collapses if it is unable to overcome the barrier posed by socialized humanity. We will have to take responsibility and say what must be said: the expropriators must be expropriated so that we can rebuild our lives through new forms of sociality. We will have to take responsibility and find ways to go beyond the invisible hand of the market and the visible fist of the state to coordinate our social practices. Ironically, that would imply looking at the equipment and machines of the most efficiently integrated transnational corporation and say: "What a waste of social wealth!"

4. . . . and the movement of the wisdom: the space of the commons . . .

Commons are forms of *direct* access to social wealth, access that is not mediated by competitive market relations. The fact that we can today pose the question of their actualisation, that they enter the imagery space of modern political discourse, is due to the fact that in last two decades we have witnessed and practiced numerous struggles against their opposite, neoliberal capitalist enclosures.

Commons acquire many forms, and they often emerge out of struggles *against* their negation. Thus, struggles against intellectual property rights opens up the questions of knowledge as

commons. Struggles against privatization of water, education and health, opens the question of water, education and health as commons. Struggles against landlessness open up the question of common land. Struggles against environmental destruction open up the question of environmental commons. In a word, struggle against actual or threatened enclosures opens the question of commons. . . .

Note: they *open* the question of commons, they do not immediately and uniquely pose it. Between the struggle against enclosure and the positing of commons there is a political space in which co-optation — that is the acknowledgment of struggles *in order to subsume them* into a new modality of capital accumulation — can still take place. Examples of this are endless and our political discourse should be aware of this always-present danger. For example, governments' practical solutions devised to deal with the struggles against the enclosures in health and education as well as their crises, instead of fully recognizing them as commons, deploy new forms of private participation in these sectors without formal privatization. This formally acknowledges public entitlements, but at the same time shapes the nature of their services in tune with the markets, by pitting nurses against nurses, teachers against teachers, and "service consumers" against "service deliverers". At the same time, the exports of service industries are promoted, thus threatening "service consumers" and "service deliverers" in other localities. The way of cooptation is here the way of trans-local community destruction through competition.

Another example is the acknowledgment of "commons" but without their link "to communities", that is when commons are not referred to community practices for their access and reproduction. For example, behind the emerging concept of "global commons" there is, at most, an abstract concept of "global community" but no concrete communities, no problematic of their constitution, protection and empowerment, and articulation with each other. However, we cannot have commons (not even "global") without community.

Another opening to co-optation may occur when, in pursuit of "legitimacy", the movement too heavily relies on emerging critical voices from within the camp of international financial institutions. For example, uncritically relying on economists like Joseph Stiglitz, thinking that he could give us legitimacy because he *acknowledges* many of the movements' denunciation of the IMF and the Washington consensus policies, could be a risky strategy. Behind these denunciations there is no agenda that is *alternative* to competitive market interaction between people on the planet and capital accumulation with all its consequences. There is no promotion of "communities" at the basis of these criticisms, but an agenda that attempts to use our struggles to push accumulation to a possibly new phase. *If it does not succeed in pushing for an autonomous discourse on alternatives, the movement risks to capitulate to an alternative form of co-optation.*

Having said this, this struggle for commons, even as the yet nebulous political space opened with struggles against enclosures, have an immediate crucial effect: they contribute to bring capital to crisis by posing the question of *limit* to capitalist accumulation. It is like this movement, once taken as a whole, is drawing a line in the sand against growth for growth's sake, against accumulation as a panacea for the solution of all the evils of the world. In the last two decades, struggles around the world and through a process of political recomposition have seen Seattle only as the media's tip of the iceberg. To downplay this emergent quality of the movement is, in my opinion, a big mistake. It represents a big cultural shift in politics away from the mythologies of socialist growth or other strategies of growth with a "human face". The

thinking of alternatives today cannot abstract from the widespread intolerance towards the various forms of "economicism" that accompany capital's own alternatives.

Clearly, we have to acknowledge, there are many ambiguities and contradictions within the movement. For example, those who ask for a fairer liberalization of trade to the advantage of the South, are doing so to establish fair play in the competitive rules of the game, rather than attacking the game itself. This may risk of being instrumental in the co-optation of poorer communities to the logic of competitive markets, and thus contributes to their doom. Indeed, declining terms of trade, both in primary products and manufacturing, are the recurring emergent results of this competitive war among the poor. To take another example, there are environmentalists who fetishise "place" as "locality" and insist that the latter is *the* only locus of an environmentally sustainable community. They forget that the composition of large sections of the global proletariat *is* de facto today, in aspiration and composition, trans-local, and a political discourse that identifies the "place" of social cooperation only with "locality" risks being instrumental in the co-optation of "locality " against migratory flows.

As we have seen, it is despite — or perhaps because of — the ambiguities and contradictory positions between its different components that the movement, taken as a whole, is able to pose the question of a limit to capital accumulation. And this has an important consequence: posing the question of the limit to capital means simultaneously posing the question of the limit that capital places upon human free enterprise and vice versa. In other words, saying "no" to further accumulation, means saying "yes" to a plurality of *alternative* activities. This implies *reclaiming the discourse of freedom* and taking it away from the hands of business and its neoliberal political and cultural acolytes. Yes, this movement is the true and the only force for "free enterprise" in the world today! We see it for example in the worldwide production of indymedia, of that of social fora, in the assemblies in Argentinian barrios and in the networks of production cooperatives in that country, in the practice of sharing knowledge and resources while confronting Monsanto and the like by Indian farmers. Professor Hayek's followers, please take note! Look at all these instances of human beings cooperating with each other with no need of capitalist market to do the coordinating job for them! No market and no plan! Almost magic, if seen through the eye of a politician who can only think in terms of false dichotomies such as the market and the state.

And this is of course only the tip of the iceberg, the bit of social production that not only practices non-market social cooperation, but is also self-aware of its stand vis-à-vis capital's enclosures. Indeed, we are all aware of other huge yet invisible local and trans-local areas of social cooperation that go on all the time, uncoordinated by the market: software production, domestic work, transmission of historical memory, emotional work, community building, and so on and on, and on.

The "free enterprise" posed by this movement can be understood in two senses. First, free *from* the restrictions of property and rent positions in the capitalist market, as its struggles are against enclosures and open the space of commons. This implies understanding "free enterprise" as free flow of social cooperation, invention and innovation driven by need and aspiration and not by profit. Free in the sense that the organisational means of this free social cooperation is free from relations of domination, exclusion and oppression. In other words, this "free enterprise" is recognizable in the form of a plurality of *powers to*, "potentia", that are longing to get rid of all the *powers over*, or "potestas", that condition them. This second aspect opens the question of definition and learning practices *of communities*.

5. . . . and the learning practices of communities.

Alternatives become actualised through the power of seizing control of our lives, of transcending alienation beginning from our life-worlds and spheres of action. Our life-worlds define communities we belong to immediately, and these are nothing other than networks of *real* individuals, living real conditions, having real needs and aspirations and enjoying real relations among them. *Seizing power over our lives implies therefore not only being able to access resources and means of existence that enable us to organize social production, but also getting on with defending, building and transforming our communities.* Indeed, commons and communities are two sides of the same coin.

In what follow we need to look at what are the communities we belong to, where is their "place" and what is their transformative potential.

The communities we belong to.

Communities are social networks of mutual aid, solidarity, and practices of human exchange. In this sense, communities are everywhere there are sustaining non-competitive relations among human beings, and their potential existence is in every sphere of social action and, in today's world, they are overlapping.

In common parlance however, we refer to the word "community" to refer to a group of people who share something, and the nature of what they share is what characterizes the specific nature of a determinate community. For example, the business community – a phrase that make us shiver in its paradoxical association of community and business – refers to groups of people who share the same profit-drive and has the power to act upon it. The academic community, refer to all those people working in academia. The neighborhood community refers to all those people sharing the same neighborhood. The house community refers to all the people who share a same house. The mining community, refer to all those people living near a mining establishment and whose livelihood depend, directly or indirectly, on those mines.

This definition of community necessitates the definition of what is *common* among them, yet, it does not tell us anything about the *relations* among them. Certainly, we cannot talk about business community when the daily business of individual people takes the form of cut-throat competition against others. We cannot talk about the academic community when referring to the competition among academic researchers competing for scarce resources or jobs. Certainly we cannot talk about the community where we live, when we live in houses or neighborhoods in which nobody knows anybody else; in which people die and nobody notice; in which indifference, to a variety of degrees, seems to be the main mode of interaction between people; in which people *do not* act in fear that action may lead to conflict, when in fact it is the inability to deal constructively with the conflict in and outside our lives that paralyses our actions. Certainly we cannot talk about the community of workers, when as workers we go into job centers and compete against each-others for jobs. Or, once found a job, we work in ways that are largely aimed at advancing our company and *therefore*, through competition, undermining the livelihoods of the workers working for other companies.

For the definition of community therefore, we need something more than something shared among a group of people. We need also to be aware that the kind of relations among those

people is crucial. Competitive relations, unless expressed as occasional convivial races or football matches on the commons fields, cannot be the center of the production and reproduction of our lives. When we compete in the fields, someone wins and someone loses, but we all end up sharing food, drinks and jokes. When we compete in the global marketplace, we destroy and accumulate, kill and invent, ruin and enrich, pollute and clean up, humiliate and dignify and there are always very concrete people and very concrete places at both ends of each dichotomy. Capitalism, is neither one nor the other side of the dichotomy, it is the endless perpetuation of both, it is the rat-race as an end in itself. In this sense, to defend capitalism as *progress* is as unwise as to condemn it as *doom*. Capital just is, and we need to focus on how to transcend the oppositions at its core.

A political discourse that puts community-building at its core in the context of today's intra-local forms of social cooperation for the production of goods, communication, dreams and life in general, help us to identify opportunities and problems. There are opportunities, because today the range of possible communities of mutual support and enrichment that we can invent are potentially endless. Problems, because due to pervasive market relations, the existence of communities is always intertwined with their negation, i.e. sustained competitive relations. Any node of a social network of mutual aid and solidarity is also *at the same time* — whether we like it or not — a node within a social network in competition with others. The aim of a new political discourse based on commons and communities is in a sense to help disarticulate and disentangle these two dimensions by first separating them analytically, and then elaborate the next step for political strategies that aim at extending the space of commons and the practices of communities within and among nodes vis-à-vis practices of competition.

The many places of community: local and trans-local communities

When we think in terms of communities we must make an effort not to idealize or romanticize them. One of the most common ways to romanticize communities is to identify their "place" *exclusively* with their "locality" and therefore build a political discourse that, in the face of the many trans-local trends of "globalisation" aims at "going back to" the local. This romanticism is highly problematic in that "going back to" means not only to go back to things that we may miss, but *also* to things that we certainly *do not* miss. For example, to go back to the economy of the local European village means not only to go back to its conviviality, its culinary traditions, its wealth of embedded knowledge and skills. It also means "to go back to" its patriarchal forms, the particular forms of its relations of oppression and exploitation, its closed cultural environment, its relatively defensive and suspicious attitude to those "others" who do not belong to the community.

In practice, truly "going back to" the local is neither possible nor desirable. It is not possible, because today any locality however localized and isolated, is *at the same time* a node within a trans-local network of social relations. So it has to find ways to *deal with* its connections to the whole. And it deals with its connections to the whole in whatever form it chooses to or is forced to, whether in ways informed by mutual aid or by competitive forms. It is of course true that a locality could certainly choose to reduce its dependence on the outside world, and much of this dependence-reduction does indeed make a lot of sense both in environmental and social terms. But while common sense is one thing; it is quite another to build discourses that think that the needs of XXI century human beings can be squeezed into forms that are compatible with complete independence of locality. No matter whether they are in the North or the South, no matter whether we think of people living in a large metropolis or in a small jungles village.

Any discourse of alternative today must conceive a certain degree of intra-local interdependence. If this is the case, our political discourse must be very clear in identifying the general coordinates of *how* this interdependence can be played out without reproducing the same problems of competitive modalities of intra-local interdependence.

In any case, it is only through connecting to the *outside* of locality that a social node in a network can tap into the pool of human resources in general, making it possible to actualize needs and desires emerging from a locality. It is only through connecting to the *outside* that a locality can gain access to the full scale of human wealth necessary to produce and reproduce life. Food, clothing, material goods, technology, know-how, innovation, problem solving, and overall resources in general are today available to such a degree as to meet almost any needs, aspiration, and desires, once we put a stop to a mode of social interaction that pits people against people, networks against networks. It is only through connecting to the outside of locality in non-competitive forms that major problems faced by *any locality* can be in principle solvable.

"Going *back to* the local" is not desirable for two reasons. First, because proximity, locality, *may* help cohesion, but also facilitate destruction and fragmentation. "Going *back to* the local" would mean forcing emerging needs and aspirations into local rules and traditions reflecting needs, aspirations and power relations of *another* era. The clash between the authoritarian act represented by the rigid upholding of rules vis-à-vis the aspirations and needs of the ruled, is the internal opposition helping the disintegration of existing local communities, promoted, of course, by the external force of capital's enclosures. Just think about the exodus from the patriarchal, claustrophobic and authoritarian micro-communities that was the traditional nuclear family, grounded on hierarchical *relations* of oppression within a locality. Or one has to reflect upon the ″pull factors″ (as opposed to the "push factors" rooted in poverty and enclosures) at the basis of migration from the village to the relative anonymity of the city, whether in the North or the South. In this sense, trans-locality is, and has always been a safety valve allowing exodus away from potentially claustrophobic, enclosing or oppressive communities. The opposite is of course *also* true. Locality also may signify the *refuge* aspired to by social subjects in exodus away from alienating and competitive trans-local relations.

Second, the trans-locality of our current condition allows us much more than ″going back to″ locality: it allows us to invent ways forward that articulate the best of locality, those aspects that we do not want to miss, together with the best of trans-locality, the world that we want to gain. In fact, modern technology allows the creation of trans-local places in which communities can operate to complement local places, and communities are everywhere and overlapping. In today′s world, whether we are aware of it or not, each individual is a node of a series of competitive or communitarian networks, a locus either of cut-throat social relations or relations which are mutually supportive and free. The space of a new politics today is precisely the articulation of this overlapping, which is *both* an individual and collective responsibility. It implies the extension of the realm of community relations into spheres that are ruled by competitive relations. It involves building and defending spaces and commons in which communities can flourish. However, this also shields us from the naïve idea that communities flourish without the continuous learning practice of an *art* of social engagement with the other, of taking individual responsibility, of direct action in any sphere of life.

In terms of the place of community, this new political discourse thus expresses a fundamental aspiration. We want the wealth of localized knowledge and localized traditions to be available to all. We seek patterns of trans-local human exchanges that enrich us all. We want ways that

allow anybody and any local or trans-local community to "draw credit" from the "bank" of human ingenuity, paying back to the world the innovation that always accompanies the adaptation of existing resources and knowledge to specific problems and circumstances. Of course, all this with no enslaving interest charged on debt!

Community as learning practices of social relations

There is of course an opposite risk, an opposite romanticism and idealization. It is the risk that sees COMMUNITY as a singular and written with capital letters. As with the idealized and romanticized illusory community of the past, this one is also an illusory community. However, instead of looking forward by projecting its illusions from the past, it looks below by projecting its illusions from the top. I am talking of the illusory community that is the state, the idea that the state, as a separate realm of social action, is somehow all-powerful, that the state *is* the community of all its citizens, and is the only true agent that can make alternatives actual. And so the corresponding laments follow: If only we could get the right candidate in, if only we could influence the right policies, if only we could democratize it. And so we read the many proposals and manifestos the language and rationale of which is to package a set of alternatives in ways that can be ready for politicians to use. Let's help them make respectable arguments, they say, in ways that can win crumbs of consensus, while at the same time leaving an opening for cooptation.

There is of course some truth in the lament: we do want proper and honest people representing us, even if we know that existing mechanisms of representations are disempowering. We do want policies that help promote social justice, even if we know that competitive relations defended and promoted by states perpetrate injustice. And we do want democratization, in fact, lots of it, even if we know that this is not compatible with existing arrangements of "Western democracies".

However, from the perspective of commons and communities, the "state" can either be a "community of communities" — and therefore no longer the "state" as we know it — or an illusionary community used to rule our lives. To be a community of communities it has to be the horizontal articulation of communities. The more real are the abilities and powers of communities to decide for themselves, the more real is the community that emerges out of their articulation. But of course, these growing powers imply growing power over resources and the goals of social production, something that actual states today are very careful to protect on behalf of existing business interests and the perpetuation of capital accumulation. It is in this sense, that the state is an "illusionary community". Instead of being the shadow of our social cooperation, it is the divisive knife with which to enforce competition in every sphere of life, thus breaking up communities. Instead of being a simple tool to help, facilitate and promote people to exercise their many powers, the state is the "power over" that channel these "powers to" into forms compatible with capital accumulation.

We said that communities are relations of mutual aid and support, solidarity and concrete practices of human exchange that are not reduced to the market form. In this sense, community is also an art of building what capital destroys. Because, despite the communitarian rhetoric of many of the defenders of capital (of whom UK prime minister Tony Blair is the champion) the endless competitive rat-race destroys communities, whatever they are. In building and strengthening unions, in promoting campaigns, in networking across the globe, in organizing in our neighborhoods, we are building communities whereas the forces of global

capital are destroying them. The recognition of this opposition between construction and destruction of communities should focus our senses both on the risks of cooptation of this community-building and its oppositional potential. Because community is social cooperation, social fabric, and capital depends on this for its stability. Capital co-opts cooperation and mutual support – community – by limiting the scope and power of communities, trying to define the context and the forms of their interaction with each other.

Yet at the same time, capital's competitive drives are set against this social fabric, for its perpetual destruction. So the question becomes: how can we build communities and strengthen them *vis-á-vis* the anti-communitarian forces of global capital and its attempt to co-opt them? I think that the answer rests on two main issues. First, just as commons are created and sustained by communities, so networks of mutual aids and support (communities) can be created and sustained through resources, commons.

Second, the relations within these networks must express needs that are frustrated within capital relations because they cannot be actualized by capital. In this sense, community is the art of building what capital cannot build, of practicing that freedom that cannot be delivered by capitalist social relations, of dreaming those dreams that no Hollywood film can make us dream, and acting upon those dreams in a way that no global commodity chain can do. Our movement of movements, in the articulation of all its dimensions and the innovative organizational forms it gives itself, has shown what these needs and aspirations are. These are social relations that are horizontal instead of being vertical, that are inclusive, instead of being exclusive, that promote empowered participation and dignity, instead of enforcing and promoting exploitation, oppression, estrangement and competition. In a word, a different world springs from a movement that practices what it preaches.