# THE COMMONS AS A PRINCIPLE OF SOCIALIST GOVERNMENTALITY

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#### INTRODUCTION

- Research project: exploring the principles of socialist governmentality (Dolenec Žitko 2013)
- Contrasting the work of Horvat (1969, 1984) and Ostrom (1990 etc). in three directions:
  - domain beyond states and markets
  - respective conceptions of ownership and governance
  - how their theories relate to economic growth and material sustainability

#### FOUCAULT GOVERNMENTALITY

- Foucault: governmentality refers to techniques and procedures through which individuals and populations are governed
  - Encompasses both the ideational and practical components (knowledge and power):
    - a discursive field which rationalises power delineates concepts, objects, borders, arguments, justifications
    - specific forms of intervention agencies, procedures, institutions,
      legal forms etc. to govern subjects and objects of a political rationality
- According to Foucault socialism possesses the political rationale, but it lacks the practical capacity to generate institutions that would embody it
- If so, then the design of institutions that would embody socialist power is the primary task of the Left
- Socialist governmentality principles of governing the socialist state and economy
  - is the concept of the commons useful here?

#### **KEY POINT**

- the Left should engage in the design of institutions that would embody socialist objectives + in doing this it should stop relocating the struggle from the terrain of interests to the terrain of morals
- of course there is a moral argument to be made around the fact that not all aspects of our lives should be exposed to market exchange (cf Sandel, the Skidelskys' etc.), Left advocacy should not rest on invoking moral arguments but on showing that unless we act together everyone's life is going to get much shittier pretty soon
  - e.g. Wilkinson and Pickett 2010

## OWNERSHIP V. GOVERNANCE

- due to the emphasis on private property as a crucial capitalist institution, there has been too much attention on the claim for common ownership rights as the key institutional innovation important for the socialist project
  - Linebaugh: the commons are a theory that 'vests all property in the community'
  - Badiou's 'communist hypothesis': 'in a truly emancipated society, all things should be owned in common'
- in contrast, Ostrom and Horvat were centrally concerned with principles of governance, not ownership regimes.

#### **OSTROM-HORVAT**

- Ostrom (1990) destilling governance principles which ensure that those affected by a given rule participate in making it
- Horvat (1969, 1984): normative solutions to the question of ownership were insufficient.
  - Class societies did not emerge from individual private ownership over means of production but from class control over the means of production.
  - Yugoslav experience showed that abolishing private ownership did not do away with a class society – because the state kept class control.

#### **W. BROWN 1995**

- the problem of domination in capitalist relations cannot be resolved at the level of distribution, no matter how egalitarian it may be
- 'If we analyse capitalism as a political economy of domination, exploitation or alienation, then the problem of freedom is foregrounded as a problem of social and economic <u>power</u> and not only a matter of legal or political <u>status</u>.' (1995: 13).
- Self-management was an attempt of abolishing bureaucratic class control over means of production.
  - in advancing a socialist governmentality the crucial innovation is devising democratic governance principles which disable the formation of class control and domination

#### CONT.

- In contrast to that, much of the progressive political agenda in recent years has been concerned not with democratizing power but with distributing goods (Brown 1995:5).
- focusing exclusively on distributional issues, we maintain the assumption of a limited government (liberal precept), not advancing the concept of popular government – ever extending the domains of self-government (socialist precept linked to the commons)(cf Hindess 1996).

In advocating for a focus on the concept of the commons as a governance principle, not ownership regime - I am trying to shift attention back from distributional issues to questions of democratizing power.

#### **THE COMMONS**

- de Angelis (2012): the commons are a vehicle for claiming ownership over conditions needed for life (social and biological) and its reproduction
- Mattei (2012): important not to reduce the commons to a language of ownership; instead, they should be thought of as representing a social relation.
- Helfrich and Bollier (2012): the commons as a demand for effective social control over resources

All these definitions assume devising governance principles, not ownership regimes.

#### THE TRAP

- the commons invoked in social struggles to resist privatization and commodification – to protect the status quo.
- a trap which makes Left politics <u>conservative</u>: focused on preserving what is here now
  - neoliberal prescriptions are seen as representing modernization, adaptation to change, progressiveness.
- <u>naive</u> when it confronts questions of hard constraints with moral arguments ('education can not be left to the market')
- aligning techniques of governing with socialist rationale and objectives should start by acknowledging problems and constraints – but point to different causes and solutions. i.e. RECLAIM and REINTERPRET.

#### **EXAMPLES**

- Mayor of Novi Pazar, Serbia (2008)
- Croatian Railways
- Typical Left response:
  - this is not a problem, little people steal a little, the big shots steal a lot (a moral argument)
- Instead, we should start from saying yes, this is a problem, but we see both its origins and its solutions differently from the neoliberal frame
- not claiming that the status quo should be protected, but radically transformed
- liberal interpretation:
  - Origin: publicly-run services are inevitably abused because nobody is invested in making them run properly
  - Solution: transferal to private hands; a private owner will prevent abuses because he needs to make a profit

### ADVANCING A SOCIALIST GOVERNMENTALITY

- Origin: not in type of ownership but in approach to governance and question of democratic control
  - the parasitic behaviour of political parties with respect to the state, public enterprises and services.
  - Though legally public, these resources are privatised for maintaining the power of political parties in office.
- A different interpretation implies different solution
- Solution:
  - Refute liberal proposition: cases + institutional cynicism
  - Propose running key societal infrastructure and services as commons –not as public entities which are in effect under class control, but as entities over which there is effective social control
    - both in how they are run and to what end

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