

Begüm Özden Fırat - Fırat Genç

The Commons, Class Recomposition and Strategy

The Commons, Class Recomposition and Strategy¹

On the 13th of May 2014 an explosion took place in a mine operated by the Soma Coal Mining Company in the Soma district of Manisa, which cost the lives of 301 miners. This disaster became the largest corporate homicide in Turkey's history, and brought the notion of corporate homicides to the attention of the public at large. In the very same days a modest yet important discussion sprung up in anti-capitalist political circles.² The element which made this discussion so significant was that it brought up the issue of "revolutionary strategy" once more, after a very long interval, and perhaps so explicitly for the very first time. No doubt revolutionary strategy - whether referred to as such or not - has been a topic of discussion that surfaces especially during the rise of anti-capitalist movements, and is by definition dominated by conjectural tendencies. While institutions such as the social forum, which emerged as a result of strategy discussions part of the alternative globalization movements of the 90s, lost their function with the decline of the movement itself, global anti-systemic movements burgeoning in different geographic locations across the globe started looking for their own solutions and strategies, backed by all the experience accumulated in the previous period. In this regard the afore-mentioned discussion, which began immediately after the Gezi uprising and started with a search for answers to "what should be done" in terms of the mining sector, reached far beyond local and sectoral issues and became one that poses global questions with regards to the spirit of the era. We may, in fact, argue that these questions are an inherent and inseparable part of the critiques of neoliberalism and strategic tendencies of post-'68 social and political movements. This piece builds upon strategy discussions by placing commoning practices, which are of critical importance in terms of current global movements, in a relational framework with the recomposition of the working class, and focuses on the intersection of two different appearances of the global opposition.

The Return of Strategy

The essence of the discussion we mention above was what route the opposition should take with regards to sectors such as mining and energy,

which are as risky for workers they employ as they are critical in terms of the dynamics of capital accumulation in Turkey. In an early piece Akçay and Azizoğlu argued that the demand for nationalization/de-privatization remained inadequate in preventing corporate murders within the context of current market relations, and suggested the notion of commonization in its stead. Çelik held that demanding the reversion of mines to being state-run enterprises must be a priority, since the pressure of capital was bound to rise in this area due to the critical position occupied by the energy sector. Yıldırım took a similar stance by claiming that the notion of public-orientedness must be promoted as the principal element of any leftist political programme. Yet he also underlined the fact that neoliberalism has rendered the relationships between the private sector and the state quite ambiguous, and therefore emphasized the difference between truly being public-oriented "for the people" as opposed to "for capital". Benlisoy, on the other hand, enlarged the scope of the discussion with regards to work safety and proposed calling for the de-privatization of mines and enterprises within the energy sector in general as a "transitional demand" in order to stem the global ecological crisis at large. Finally, Akçay and Azizoğlu stated in a second article they wrote that they had used the term commonization in order to signify the practice of *commoning*, and that their intention was to open up for discussion the possibilities and limitations of a politics built upon this premise.

This rough summary has no doubt left out many nuances. The true nature of this discussion is, however, much beyond the suggestions voiced within it. Above and before anything else, the fact that mention of strategy has re-entered the vocabulary of social opposition movements is important in and of itself. Taking this framework into account, this piece aims to open a politico-strategic discussion based upon the notions of the commons and commoning in the dual context created both by the "great recession" following the 2008-2009 crisis and the uprisings that began in the 2010s.

The main thesis underlying our arguments and propositions may be expressed as follows: The global political topography of our time is being reshaped through uprisings that exhibit a global simultaneity and share the same moment - although they are not at all independent from the specific social and political conditions of the contexts in which they emerge. This reshaping of the political topography has not yet, however, given rise to the possibility of entirely rebuilding the political sphere as a whole.³

This asymmetry between different levels of the political landscape must be linked to the "utter defeat" caused by neoliberalism, which has totally changed the nature and composition of the working class. Furthermore, even though they propose diametrically opposed modes of intervention, the analyses of neoliberalism by the movements that characterize the field of radical social opposition today result in the reproduction of binaries such as the market vs. the state, micro vs. macro or political vs. everyday. It is possible to say that in our day the divide between the social and the political has been rendered absolute to the degree of being set in stone, and this poses one of the

obstacles in front of the consolidation of anti-capitalist oppositional forces. The conceptualization of the commons/commoning may provide a useful tool for the formulation of an empowering strategic path towards overcoming these binaries and ascribing meaning to the destruction wrought by neoliberal strategies.

Neoliberalism and Three Answers

Below we provide a brief summary of three main perspectives, which shape the theoretical and practical repertory of the social opposition and influence the anti-neoliberalism movement. The commoning approach we shall then discuss is separate from these three - although there are certain common aspects, and we believe this approach forms the basis of a fourth wave that contains the disruptive kernels of a global anti-capitalist movement.

The first wave, which shapes one of the main arteries of leftist politics both in the global north and the global south, sees neoliberalism as mainly consisting of a package of economic policies that aim to dismantle the structure and practices of the welfare state of the past, functioning for the benefit of capital and naturally to the detriment of workers. The much-told narrative is that international regulatory bodies formed in line with the interests of global capital under the patronage of imperialist powers such as the U.S. take on a critical/coercive role in making the public authorities of individual countries accept these policy packages one by one. This assessment has from time to time resulted in the emergence of a localist-nationalist vision in labour union movements especially in countries that opted for an import-substitution strategy for development in their past. Yet what is more significant here in terms of our current discussion is the position attributed to the state in this narrative. According to this, public institutions that withdrew from the field of production and reproduction due to the increasing domination of the narrow interests of fractions involved in the global commerce and finance networks of capital must be called upon to re-impose themselves in an interventionist manner. This kind of move is considered a remedy for the working class movement to regain its lost power. The desire to return to the past demonstrated by this "narrow public-oriented" proposition is based on an analysis that places the state outside/above the struggle between social classes and perceives the relationship between the state and the market as a zero-sum game.

The second wave, represented mostly by followers of the social democrat parties of the past, who have gravitated towards leftist liberalism today, attributes the state more of a regulatory role than an interventionist one. While quite radical suggestions such as taxing global financial transactions come up within its scope from time to time, the main strategic proposal put forth by this perspective is the creation and expansion of regulatory mechanisms under the institutional umbrella of supranational regional bodies in order to hold

savage capitalism in check. For instance, despite having suffered serious blows in the face of the onslaught mounted on a global scale by capital following the latest economic crisis, the vision of a European Union that prioritizes employment and social aid and is molded by leftist values or is at least more open to them comprises the political horizon of this perspective. We have recently witnessed the entry of concepts and demands such as the right to the city, the commons or participatory/grassroots democracy (having undergone much transformation) into the political vocabulary of this position, which invites the state back to the stage around some kind of neo-Keynesian economic policy.

Although not as influential at the level of political parties, civil society organizations or labour unions as the first two tendencies, a third wave or perspective we have observed to be quite dominant especially among younger generation activists of the global anti-capitalist movement does not visualize the relationship between the market and the state in terms of intervention or regulation; rather, it constructs its own political practice "outside" all of these. Aiming to push back capital as it increases its influential capacity both in geographic and social terms at this stage of neoliberalism, this third position deems its strategic priority to be working against processes of objectification by way of engaging in everyday practices in areas where capitalist market relations are not all-pervasive. This strategic approach is at times expressed through metaphors such as creating cracks or hair line fractures, and its main element is finding or constructing "heterotopias" - i.e. places where alternative practices may flourish and accumulate - in the face of a capitalism, which is gradually evolving towards a more ubiquitous and liquefied architecture. This wave may therefore be summarized most succinctly by the slogan "to change the world without taking power". While it on the one hand rightfully emphasizes the fact that social emancipation lies beyond political change in its narrow sense, on the other hand it places political power relations that materialize within the state outside the scope of social struggle.

The first two of these perspectives we mention, namely those that contain propositions re-inviting the state in an interventionist or regulatory manner, are - in our opinion - afflicted by some kind of "dreaminess" since they do not adequately take into account the forms relationships between the state and capital have taken in the neoliberal period. The fact that the state summoned here is envisioned with reference to the welfare state model means forgetting that this model itself is a compromise that was reached at a certain time in history and as a direct result of the mass force and influence achieved by class struggle.

On the other hand, the search for alternative practices and places as shaped by this third perspective cannot, by definition, encompass all the geographic regions in the dominion of capitalism - as in, the entire globe today. Moreover, it also does not appear quite possible for societal groups relatively more exempt from the supervision of the state and capital to fully meet on a social

and political level with those that have no such exemption. For this reason, the "problematique of the subject", which is often loosely conceptualized, returns - albeit in different forms. In short, it may be argued that this kind of strategic proposition results in practices that absolutize emancipatory practices on the everyday level and render the complete transformation of the political sphere secondary, at best.

"Utter Defeat" and Reconstruction

It is our opinion that although some appear to suggest top-down political practices and others bottom-up ones, all three of these propositions fall together in terms of reproducing divisions between macro and micro levels, the political and the social, the sphere of the everyday and the sphere of politics. The eventual result is that the anti-neoliberalist movement either becomes synonymous with a search for institutional solutions or a collection of practices that are unable to become widespread or popularized.

It is our opinion that neoliberalism, on the other hand, cannot be seen as a generic package of policies where states take upon an intermediary role for the sole purpose of generating more profit for companies. Neoliberalism must rather be understood as an amalgam of strategies that works to systematically degrade the networks of socialization and therefore reduce the political capacities, which oppressed groups and classes have as direct or indirect results of their past struggles, in order to ensure the transformation of relations of production and reproduction in the favour of capital. In other words, the main principle of neoliberalism is directly linking the political capacities of oppressed and subjugated social classes to the dynamics of capital accumulation.

Let us quote Ahmet Bekmen at length, as he makes a similar emphasis:

"Class consciousness does not just suddenly descend upon one from above. There are material conditions that give rise to it. The working class, which may be considered relatively unified both in terms of its living spaces and work places, and whose social and economic relations mostly concentrate in well-defined spaces (from neighbourhood solidarity associations to workers' unions) has the necessary material basis for class consciousness. What neoliberal capitalism has attempted first is to tear apart this relative unity, and thus destroy the potential of the working class to truly be a class and act as one. This is the direct impact of many policies such as 'breaking' workers' unions (scattering economic organizations), urban transformation projects (dismantling the unity of life and space, isolating the working class from urban public space), contracting labour (dividing the unity of the work place), and precarization (obscuring ties among the working class itself and between it and the society at large). All of these result in obliterating the capacity of the working class to act as a class, that is, the central element of its political

capacity itself. One of the important factors distinguishing neoliberal authoritarianism from other oppressive regimes such as fascism is that although it always holds the possibility of resorting to oppressive measures in reserve, its essential method is making the decapacitation of the working class a part of the process of capital accumulation."⁴

This loss of capacity is experienced as a many-layered and calcified powerlessness and loss of self-esteem in a manner that is surely not limited to the level of political representation. It has been achieved by way of strategic interventions by the state and by capital into nodes where relations of class, gender and ethnicity intersect and articulate with each other in specific and unique ways in different situations. Looking back now, it is possible to see that the destruction wrought by this class war waged from above underlies our recollections of the neoliberal period as one of "utter defeat".

We are of the opinion that evaluating this destruction as a merely quantitative phenomenon - that is, as a relative and temporary decline in the force of the working class movement - would be misleading. In this sense, we consider it more correct to follow the distinction emphasized by Flavio C. and speak of "the end of the workers movement" as we knew it in the 20th century rather than "a crisis in the workers movement".⁵ It is needless to mention that making this emphasis is quite different from end-of-the-century theses preaching on about the extinction of the material existence of the working class as a social and political phenomenon. What we rather wish to emphasize is the fact that different waves and movements within the leftist political imaginary - which is what has defined the working class movement in the entire world from roughly the end of the 19th century to the end of the 20th - have looked to the institutions and solidarity networks of the working class, that is, its material and cultural unity in order to formulate their analyses and projections; and now these networks and institutions have been disintegrated, this material and cultural unity dissolved. This is what we make of the utter defeat caused by neoliberalism.

On the other hand, it is clear that the discussion on the proletarianization of "white-collar" workers, mostly grouped in a vague 'middle-class' category and mainly working in the service sector further complicates this "end" we mention above. Transformations in this sphere, which covers a wide array from those working freelance to teachers, doctors and engineers condemned to flexible contracts, from students working part-time to employees in plazas or call-centres, are reinforcing the recomposition of the working class as a whole. The inadequacy or total lack of union organizing in this area, the widespread and concentrated nature of contracted, precarious and flexible employment regimes, the destruction of living spaces that comes about with the transformation of urban space - which, for these factions of society, especially signifies the privatization of public spaces all end up creating commonalities in the circumstances of these groups and those of "blue-collar" workers - a fateful partnership of some kind. It is not, however, quite possible to overcome the problems in terms of organizing posed by this dynamic, which are

becoming ever more entrenched, by simply consecrating a new and self-contained class called 'the precariat' - as has been attempted by certain movements in the past decade in Europe.

Commoning and Self-empowerment

Before us stands the obligation to bring embodiment to political subjects that are not only able to withstand the brutal onslaught of capitalism in this neoliberal age, but are also capable of creating a counter political, economic and cultural project that would actually be able to transcend it. Yet we believe that this cannot solely be achieved through a re-strengthening of economic/political institutions whose meaning and function have changed radically with the recomposition of classes or by resurrecting public-oriented/statist demands. This claim we make does not mean completely disregarding working class institutions passed down from former times - such as unions. Instead, what we hope to highlight is the necessity to reconstruct the meanings and functions of these institutions. This is only possible by turning towards building alternatives that are as believable and concrete as they are experimental and daring.

The need to carry out a strategy discussion with an eye for the process of class recomposition is proof of the social and political importance of the proposition of commoning. The path to constructing the political subject is through the creation of new concrete spaces and practices for solidarity among the oppressed and subjugated, as well as through strengthening and augmenting already existing ones. In this sense, the gray zone that lies between the separation of macro and micro, which resembles a "minefield" according to Akçay and Azizoğlu, must be the focal point of any strategy discussion. For example, the fact that the divide between what is micro and what is macro in Turkey has become even wider in the wake of the Gezi protests - on the one hand there is the effort to build a top-down public-oriented/populist movement, and on the other there are practices that aim to design and create "alternative lives" only in localities where they exist - clearly reveals the necessity as well as possibility for establishing some kind of relationality between these two levels. Again according to Akçay and Azizoğlu, we should not let the risk of ending up fixing defective aspects of the system taken while attempting to create practices regarding this "in-between" space make us timid and bog us down. For only the uncovering and institutionalization of autonomous/self-governing practices in the field of production and reproduction shall enable the establishment of a truly founding politics. In this sense, we must also begin contemplating other areas, along with sectors that carry a certain amount of urgency such as mining, energy or construction, within the framework of "deprivatization".

What we mean to imply by way of commoning practices or spaces of solidarity are not only physical spaces such as squat houses, gardens, social centres or

soup kitchens. We may add neighbourhood solidarity groups and forums, producer cooperatives to be run by blue and white-collar workers, product cooperatives that shall link producers and consumers and establish a food commons politics in cities, health centres and day-care centres that are non-commercial and based on the principle of autonomy/self-rule, sports clubs or radios that hold an enormously important place in the construction of counter public spheres, and many other forms that may not occur to us today. The "institutionalization" of such commoning practices shall constitute a reversal of the political effects of fragmentation in the field of production, make a dent in the increasing marketability of reproduction, and create a certain amount of transitivity between these two fields. Ensuring the material and cultural unity of a class requires - if we are to take inspiration from E.P. Thompson - sharing common experiences in terms of both the field of production and that of reproduction. The reconstruction of the lost public presence of workers through new means - a.k.a. the creation of counter-publics - is an inherent part of rebuilding the political capacity of the working class.

We believe that the proposition for commoning has two distinctive components: self-empowerment and uncovering utopian moments or stops. Self-empowerment may be defined as the collective empowerment brought about by practices that first of all stem the sense of fragmentation and powerlessness caused by neoliberalism and create commonalities between different personal experiences. If a class is defined by modes of consumption as much as it is by relations of production, then concrete bonds between work places and living spaces may establish the material basis of a political recovery and sustainability that shall carry social movements further ahead. This kind of approach shall also transform relations of solidarity among resistance movements from mere "sympathetic feelings" and supportive actions into mutual empowerment and institutionalization.

We also find it important to point out concrete utopian moments/stops to be created by the establishment and rendering permanent of networks among these practices related to self-empowerment. What we mean by concrete utopian moments or stops is the transformative potential of practices that do not reproduce existing social relations of exploitation and domination, that instead create starting points for forming freer and more equal social relations and contain the premises of an anti-capitalist social existence. As Özgür Narin states in his article on experiences of workers' self-rule in Turkey, "although taking down bosses one by one, starting production without bosses in one or a couple factories does not actually transform social relations of production" the most important gain achieved by such practices of self-rule "is that they bring to the agenda through live, flesh and bone examples that this system of production with deadly results, which is fully based on profit and hence disregards work safety and job security as well as people's unemployment may in fact be completely reorganized by its producers themselves."⁶ This achievement is a concrete expression of the reversal of what we have termed the loss of collective capacity.

In short, it may be argued that today the duty of social opposition, which is currently concentrated on either macro or micro-level strategies, is to rather encourage commoning practices that shall enable transitivity between these two levels, as well as strengthen those practices that already exist and bring them in contact with each other. The dispersal of common spaces, cultural and social separation and ultimately the loss of the public itself caused by contracted, precarious and flexible employment regimes and spatial interventions creates similarities between our day and the state of the working class in the 19th century. Let us remember that social relations predating and enabling the class organizations of that period were built in cafes, shared kitchens, through forms of solidarity based on mutual benefit and in workmen's clubs. The kernel of organizations that shall create the political subject of our day also rests in the institutionalization and multiplication of commoning practices that shall enable spaces of solidarity where class may reconstruct itself. The political subject shall gain its form and content to the extent that it is able to reconstruct lost networks of solidarity and recreate lost unities in a creative and disruptive manner.

Translated from Turkish by Feride Eralp

¹ This piece was first published in December 2014 in the website *Müştereklerimiz (Our Commons)* and later in the Winter 2015 (3rd) issue of *Başlangıç Dergisi (Başlangıç Journal)*. Revising the article two years after its original publication, we chose to refrain from commenting on our current political circumstances for it to remain true to the context and spirit of the period in which it was written and be read as such.

² The discussion started with a piece written by Ümit Akçay and Bert Azizoğlu: <http://baslangicdergi.org/kamulastirma-mi-kamusallastirma-mi-umitakcay-bert-azizoglu/>. For subsequent pieces cf. Stefo Benlisoy, <http://baslangicdergi.org/simdi-degirse-ne-zaman-madenler-kamulastirilmali-stefo-benlisoy/>; Aziz Çelik, <http://www.birgun.net/news/view/soz-bitti-madenler-kamulastirilsin/8143>; Deniz Yıldırım, <http://www.birgun.net/news/view/halkci-kamucu-secenek-neden-nasil/8451>; Akçay and Azizoğlu, <http://baslangicdergi.org/strateji-sorunu-ve-hak-mucadeleleri-bir-perspektif-olarak-kamusallastirma-umit-akcay-bert-azizoglu/>.

³ In this vein, the disappointment caused by Syriza in Greece and the Podemos experience in Spain, as well as the wave of violence triggered by the historic victory achieved by the HDP in Turkey when it surpassed the electoral threshold, demonstrated how the hope for political transformation may be clamped down upon by global networks of finance and the instruments of violence of the nation-state.

⁴ Ahmet Bekmen, <http://www.antikapitalisteylem.org/makaledetay.php?id=501#2>.

⁵ Flavio C., <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2949>.

⁶ Özgür Narin, <http://musterekerimiz.org/turkiye-isci-sinifi-tarihinde-isci-ozyonetim-deneyimleri-ve-kriz-donemlerinde-ozyonetimin-olanaklari/>.