

Excerpt (pages 300 - 303)  
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Empire

## COMMONS

There has been a continuous movement throughout the modern period to privatize public property. In Europe the great common lands created with the break-up of the Roman Empire and the rise of christianity were eventually transferred to private hands in the course of capitalist primitive accumulation. Throughout the world what remains of the vast public spaces are now only the stuff of legends: Robin Hood's forest, the Great Plains of the Amerindians, the steppes of the nomadic tribes, and so forth. During the consolidation of industrial society, the construction and destruction of public spaces developed in an ever more powerful spiral. It is true that when it was dictated by the necessities of accumulation (in order to foster an acceleration or leap in development, to concentrate and mobilize the means of production, to make war, and so forth), public property was expanded by expropriating large sectors of civil society and transferring wealth and property to the collectivity. That public property, however, was soon reappropriated in private hands. In each process the communal possession, which is considered natural, is transformed at public expense into a second and third nature that functions finally for private profit. A second nature was created, for example, by damming the great rivers of western North America and irrigating the dry valleys, and then this new wealth was handed over to the magnates of agribusiness. Capitalism sets in motion a continuous cycle of private reappropriation of public goods: the expropriation of what is common.

The rise and fall of the welfare state in the twentieth century is one more cycle in this spiral of public and private appropriations. The crisis of the welfare state has meant primarily that the structures of public assistance and distribution, which were constructed through public funds, are being privatized and expropriated for private gain. The current neoliberal trend toward the privatization of energy and communication services is another turn of the spiral. This consists in granting to private businesses the networks of energy and communication that were built through enormous expenditures of public monies. Market regimes and neoliberalism survive off these private appropriations of second, third, and nth nature. The commons, which once were considered the basis of the concept of the public, are expropriated for private use and no one can lift a finger. The public is thus dissolved, privatized, even as a concept. Or really, the immanent relation between the public and the common is replaced by the transcendent power of private property.

We do not intend here to weep over the destruction and expropriation that capitalism continually operates across the world, even though resisting its force (and in particular resisting the expropriation of the welfare state) is certainly an eminently ethical and important task.

We want to ask, rather, what is the operative notion of the common today, in the midst of postmodernity, the information revolution, and the consequent transformations of the mode of production. It seems to us, in fact, that today we participate in a more radical and profound commonality than has ever been experienced in the history of capitalism. The fact is that we participate in a productive world made up of communication and social networks, interactive services, and common languages. Our economic and social reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by co-produced services and relationships. Producing increasingly means constructing cooperation and communicative commonalities.

The concept of private property itself, understood as the exclusive right to use a good and dispose of all wealth that derives from the possession of it, becomes increasingly nonsensical in this new situation. There are ever fewer goods that can be possessed and used exclusively in this framework; it is the community that produces and that, while producing, is reproduced and redefined. The foundation of the classic modern conception of private property is thus to a certain extent dissolved in the postmodern mode of production.

One should object, however, that this new social condition of production has not at all weakened the juridical and political regimes of private property. The conceptual crisis of private property does not become a crisis in practice, and instead the regime of private expropriation has tended to be applied universally. This objection would be valid if not for the fact that, in the context of linguistic and cooperative production, labor and the common property tend to overlap. Private property, despite its juridical powers, cannot help becoming an ever more abstract and transcendental concept and thus ever more detached from reality.

A new notion of "commons" will have to emerge on this terrain. Deleuze and Guattari claim in *What Is Philosophy?* that in the contemporary era, and in the context of communicative and interactive production, the construction of concepts is not only an epistemological operation but equally an ontological project. Constructing concepts and what they call "common names" is really an activity that combines the intelligence and the action of the multitude, making them work together. Constructing concepts means making exist in reality a project that is a community. There is no other way to construct concepts but to work in a common way. This commonality is, from the standpoint of the phenomenology of production, from the standpoint of the epistemology of the concept, and from the standpoint of practice, a project in which the multitude is completely invested. The commons is the incarnation, the production, and the liberation of the multitude. Rousseau said that the first person who wanted a piece of nature as his or her own exclusive possession and transformed it into the transcendent form of private property was the one who invented evil. Good, on the contrary, is what is common.